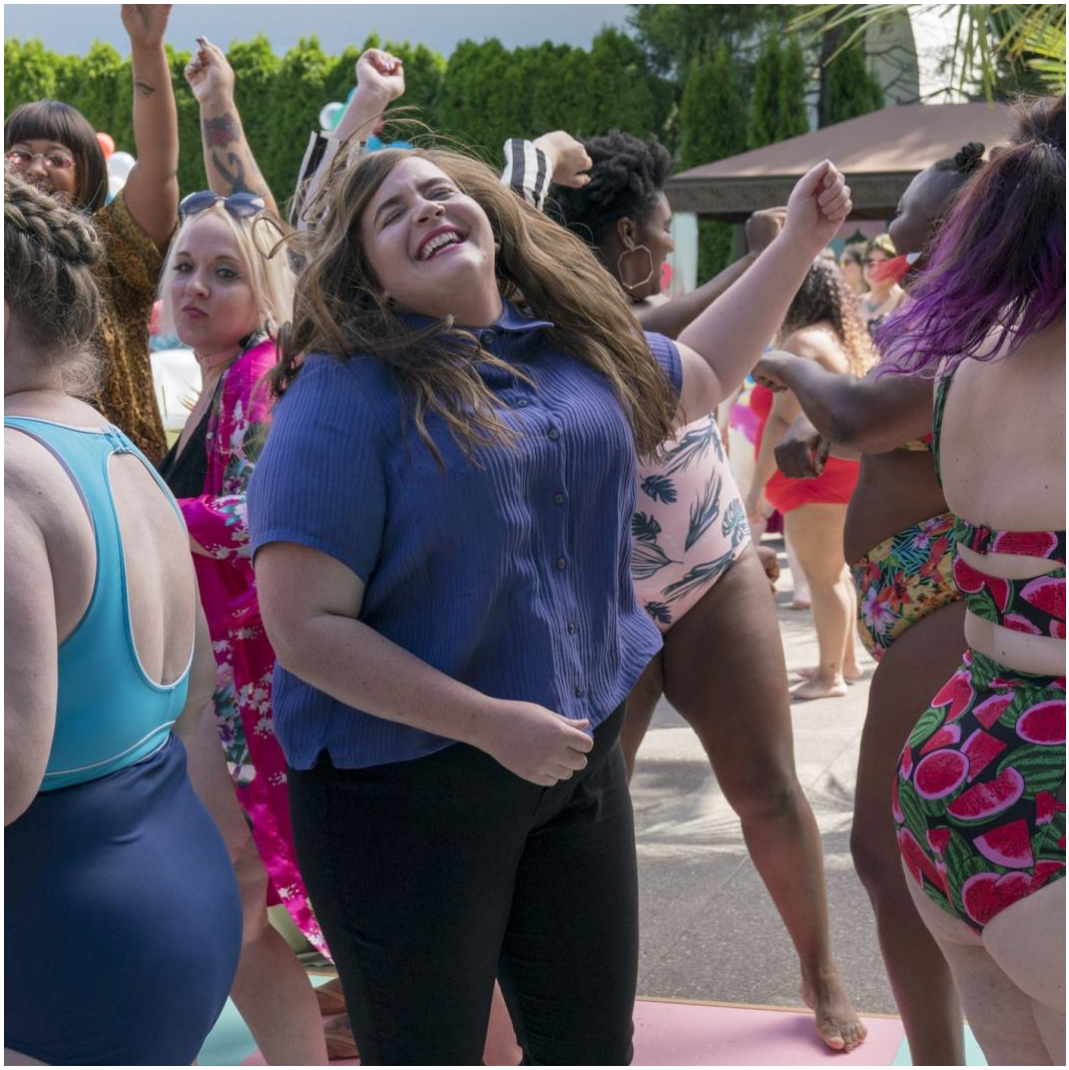

Large Bodies on Small Screens: Fat representation in contemporary American and British television

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Abstract

This thesis examines the narratives told about fatness in contemporary British and American television (from 2010 – 2021). Conversations about fat oppression and anti-fat bias have become more visible in recent years, and fat characters have started appearing more often on television. However, the specific framings and positions associated with fatness have gone mostly unexplored in feminist media studies, where fat is most often framed through the reductive categories of disgust, horror, or unruliness.

To address this gap in research, this thesis utilises a method of embodied feminist textual analysis of TV, making connections between a variety of contemporary shows featuring fat characters. This work argues that the neoliberal structures of governance and the moral frameworks that guide public discourse about fatness are enabled and intensified in the patterns and rhythms of contemporary television. In pursuit of this argument, this thesis demonstrates methods of analysing fat characters and their narratives by considering fat as an intersectional lens; the analysis here interrogates specific representative tropes, "fat-involved" familial relationships, and meanings associated with fat in social justice-oriented – or, "woke" – programmes in order to draw conclusions about the dynamic and boundless medium of contemporary television.

This thesis, then, presents a significant intervention into contemporary feminist media criticism and into the nascent discipline of fat studies. By "fattening" (in other words, situating fat as a material reality with constructed characteristics) feminist studies of television and other media, this work argues that we can enable new possibilities for reading bodies, relationships, and lived realities alike. By addressing the nuances and intricacies of media studies, in turn, we broaden the scope and abilities of fat studies to more fully understand the specificities of media representation.

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Acknowledgements

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Finally, I must thank my best friend in the whole world, my beloved Roz. I never did find out where all those mugs of "hot" and plates of fajitas magically appeared from, but I suspect you had something to do with it. I love you the most, ever, of anyone. Being married to you is genuinely the joy of my life (even more than drinking coffee, although it's close).

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of both my parents and particularly to my mother, Dr. Debra K. Jenkins: woman of a thousand hobbies, champion of lifelong learning, and passionate viewer of television. Late in her life, she pursued higher education, diving into a bachelor's programme (rediscovering science and maths in her 50s!) and then attaining a master's degree (mastering the notoriously unwieldy programming language Java). Just before her passing, she completed her own PhD in Education, Health, and Behaviour Studies at the University of North Dakota. For a brief time, we shared the experience of pursuing our doctoral research interests.

It is my privilege to cite the impressive project to which she dedicated so much of her energy, intellect, and talent: "Parting a Sea of Read Images" (Jenkins 2018). I love you and miss you, mom; I strive to become even half the writer, thinker, and teacher that you were.

Author's Declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this dissertation is the result of my own work, under the supervision of Dr. Amy Holdsworth and Dr. Lisa Kelly. This work has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

Introduction

> Feminists and philosophers seem to share a common view of the human subject as a being made up of two dichotomously opposed characteristics: mind and body, thought and extension, reason and passion, psychology and biology (…) **Body is thus what is not mind, what is distinct from and other than the privileged term. It is what the mind must expel in order to retain its "integrity."**
>
> Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies* (1994: 3)

> "One of our objectives, then, is **unmasking the fat body, rendering it visible and present, rather than invisible and absent: seen, rather than unsightly**."
>
> Kathleen LeBesco and Jana Evans Braziel, *Bodies Out of Bounds* (2001: 1)

In the early stages of writing this thesis I attended a routine medical appointment. Making polite conversation while we waited for a prescription to print, the doctor asked me about my research. When I smiled and said I was writing about "the representation of fat people on television," he nodded approvingly. "That's a good thing - I hope all these weight-loss and nutrition shows can help people learn about obesity." As a fat person in a doctor's office I sat in stunned silence, reminded yet again of my reasons for conducting this research. As should be no surprise, this thesis does not share with my (former) doctor the notion that fatness is a condition of ignorance to be dispelled by public engagement with extreme diet and weight-loss television shows. It seems to me that if it were, the UK and US populations would be markedly thinner in correlation with the ever-increasing list of pedagogical weight-centric TV programmes with titles like *My 600-Lb Life* (TLC 2012 -), *1000-Lb Sisters* (TLC 2020 -), or *Shut-ins: Britain's Fattest People* (CH4 2021 -). Rather, this thesis seeks to illuminate the narrow neoliberal frameworks so often used to represent fat experiences and, in doing so, to contribute to a growing body of research that recognises the transgressive potential of reading media and culture through fatness as an intersectional lens.

Drawing together scholarship from the nascent discipline of fat studies and more established feminist media studies, this study puts forward a significant intervention into

media criticism. Issues of fat representation have long been an interest of mine, both because of my personal investment in the project of fat acceptance and, frankly, because of the dearth of scholarship on the topic.[1] Despite the visibility of fatness (as large bodies quite literally take up significantly more space than thin ones), the realities of fat experience and the nuances of fat representation remain hidden, marked invisible by the all-encompassing rhetoric of the "obesity epidemic" (Gailey 2014). For the majority of people in the US and UK, fat is well-understood as something to be done away with, often by any means necessary.[2] Fat is the undesirable substance we lose or shed, burn or melt off, reduce or cut back; we worry about gaining weight, packing on pounds, or beefing up, lest we be defeated in the nationwide (and indeed, international) "war" against "obesity." These concerns that we take to be common-sense, though they infiltrate nearly every arena of public and private life, are not, in fact, neutral truths. Our modern understanding of weight is rather an amalgamation of a great number of studies, experiences, moral panics, myths, and popular constructions of body size (Pausé & Taylor 2021; Rich 2011).

Since the early 1990s there has been a powerful, concerted effort to curb "obesity" at an international level. The World Health Organisation (WHO) says that "globesity" (a portmanteau for global obesity) is "one of today's most blatantly visible – yet most neglected – public health problems" (World Health Organisation 2022). "Obesity" is often framed in either politicised or medicalised language - the "War on Obesity" or the "Obesity Epidemic" (Monaghan et al. 2010; Monaghan et al. 2018). In one clear example of this, Monaghan (2017: 196) describes the response to a 2015 statement by England's Chief Medical Officer - Professor Dame Sally Davies - that resulted in renewed sensationalised headlines in publications like "the Daily Mail" describing obesity as that which is as "dangerous as a terror threat" (Borland 2015).[3] Following this statement, Davies reportedly called for the

[1] The word "fat" here, as I will discuss at length in the next chapter, is used as an attempt to redress "obesity" through a physical descriptor that is not related to the pathologised tone of "o" words (obesity, obesogenic, overweight).

[2] The American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery estimates 256,000 bariatric surgeries were carried out in 2019 - up from 158k in 2011 (ASMBS 2021). In the UK – across public and private healthcare – bariatric surgeries numbered around 8,000 per year (Small et al. 2020).

[3] The "threat" is also made clear in public health campaigns. Cancer Research UK ran the "obesity is a cause of cancer, too" campaign in 2018-19, featuring cigarette packets donning the tagline (Varshney 2021); the Pennington Biomedical Research Centre hosts the "Obecity" site, promoting a fictional town of fat people with the tagline: "Where it's not what you're eating, it's what you're being fed" (VisitObecity.org).

government to add obesity "to its National Register of Civil Emergencies" which is a list of "major possible threats to public health which includes terrorism, war, flooding and disease pandemics" that warrant government-wide initiatives.

Such heightened language and institutionalised fervour toward fat reveals a striking moral panic - or as some have put it, a "fat panic" - in which public concern about weight cannot be attributed to perceived medical risks alone; rather, to merit such response, fat must present a greater threat to morality and social values (Campos et al. 2006; Cohen 2002 [1972]; Fraser et al. 2010; LeBesco 2010; Pieterman 2007; Saguy & Almeling 2005). The sense of panic is further reflected in - and amplified by - popular media, where fatness is very often sensationalised and dramatised (Monaghan et al. 2018); as Boero explains, "media attention given to obesity is unprecedented, constant, and central to the construction of obesity as one of the greatest social problems facing the Unites States and the world in the twenty-first century" (2013: 40). The primary studies of large bodies in media have focused on the dominant "problem frames" (i.e., the framings that describe obesity as fatal, disgusting, and expensive) (Saguy 2013) and on the ways in which fat bodies are dehumanised in news coverage (Cooper 2007; Lupton 2018: 52). Some scholars have identified how representations of fat on TV are intertwined with neoliberal ideas of self-governance and discipline (Campos 2004; Giovanellie & Osterag 2009; Greenhalgh 2015), pointing to the brutal, militant qualities of weight loss shows (Zimdars 2015). Others have worked to demonstrate the lack of factual evidence for "obesity" as a meaningful point of focus for reality TV (Rothblum 2018).

Media attention to fatness has also been a major sticking point in fat memoirs, which often isolate certain media representations in order to demonstrate individual engagements with anti-fat bias and weight stigma (Gordon 2020; Hagen 2019; West 2016). In recent years, then, critical scholarship has increasingly turned an eye to television - rather than strictly to news media - in order to explore representations and narrativisations of fatness (e.g. Heyes 2007; Inthorn & Boyce 2010; Lupton 2018; Raisborough 2016; Rich 2011; Warin 2011). These readings have found a clear basis and founding for the notion of a moral panic, finding that recent fat representations "have contributed to the evolution of a contemporary discourse in which one's body must be made to represent one's character" (Heyes 2007: 17). As Jeannine Gailey explains, this kind of discourse about moralised bodies "makes many

people—both thin and fat—dreadfully fearful of getting fat (or fatter)" (2021: 4). Indicators of these fears are plentiful. In one particularly harrowing survey, participants indicated that they would rather give up one year of life than be "obese" (Schwartz et al. 2006); among this sample of 4,000 Americans, at least, the heightened medical rhetoric surrounding fatness meant they equated weight gain with death. This pattern is borne out in more recent work, too. Lockdowns due to the Covid-19 pandemic have led to "widespread concerns" among the wider public about "overeating, sedentary behaviour, and weight gain" according to one study which found an "explosion" of social media posts referencing the "quarantine-15," or the ostensible 15 pounds (6.8 kg) that people gained as gyms closed and sedentary remote work became a norm for many (Pearl 2020: 1180). Still, despite fears about weight - or, more likely, in light of them - eating disorders in the United States and United Kingdom continued to proliferate as global diet industry profits increased for yet another year (Galmiche et al. 2019; Marketdata LLC 2021). In this climate, Eller argues, "fat people suffer, and they suffer in virtue of being fat" (2014: 220).

Moralised discourse about fatness, in other words, contributes to anti-fat bias, the term used to broadly refer to "prejudice and discrimination against people who are fat" (Elran-Barak & Bar-Anan 2018). Anti-fat bias is embedded in both institutions and private spaces, often in ways that intersect with stigmas around a number of Othered identity groups. For example, fat people - in ways that overlap with the issues of access faced by disabled, elderly, Black, or queer people - regularly encounter spaces that are physically inaccessible or are outright hostile. Fat activist Aubrey Gordon (2017), for instance, describes the emotional experience of being berated by a man after he refused to sit next to her large body on a flight. She notes the economic conditions that set the scene for the interaction: to accommodate more passengers per flight, airlines have elected to narrow their seats. Over the last twenty years, this process has led to an average loss of ten centimetres from seat width alone (Whitley & Gross 2019).[4] The majority of airlines have failed to accompany these changes with any support for fat passengers, who - even if they outright purchase a second seat, as Gordon had before her flight was rescheduled - are not guaranteed accommodations for their size. In complement to these issues Gordon points to the

[4] Airlines have also chosen to reduce seat pitch – or the distance between rows more commonly referred to as "legroom" - by another 10 centimetres, creating cramped conditions.

deleterious effects of rampant anti-fat bias, making specific reference to depictions of fat people in popular culture. Writing to her aggressor, she says:

> … this isn't the first time you've seen me treated this way. You've seen me in fat suits in movies, the simple shape of me eliciting boundless peals of laughter in living rooms and theatres. You've seen my humiliation on *The Biggest Loser*, shouted at and shamed for entertainment, bet on like a starved dog in a grisly fight.

As Gordon gestures to here, anti-fat bias and media representations of fatness have grown together to (re)produce stigmas in the name of humour or of danger (Puhl & Heuer 2009; Tomiyama et al. 2015).

This is clear in TV from the early 2000s; as "obesity" rhetoric became a part of everyday life in the new millennium - becoming a popular topic of conversation with the release of documentaries like Morgan Spurlock's documentary *Super Size Me* (2004) and the popularisation of weight-loss competition TV shows like *The Biggest Loser* ([USA] NBC 2004 - 2016; [UK] Sky/ITV 2005 - 2013) - depictions of fatness primarily served to (often vigorously) uphold anti-fat bias. As the conversation about weight stigma slowly shifted to incorporate tenets of fat activism (through grassroots efforts as well as the work of US-based National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance) and to recognise the influence of the growing diet and wellness industries on public policy, representations of fatness started to become more explicit. Shows like *Mike & Molly* (CBS 2010-2016) - about a couple who meet at an Overeaters Anonymous meeting - and the drama series *Huge* (ABC Family 2010) - following a group of teens at a weight-loss camp - started to explore the effects of obesity rhetoric on fat people's lives.

Over the last decade, "attempts to disrupt the dominant anti-obesity rhetoric" have begun to make their way into public discourse, "albeit primarily through the more informal channels afforded by comments sections of digital media" (Cain et al. 2017: 184). Social media interactions (for example, on hashtags or accounts associated with TV shows) have altered the media landscape and opened up new potentials for fat representation while TV has, in kind, taken on a new and more explicit approach to depicting fat (Hass 2017, 2018). We still encounter more familiar forms of fat representation: weight-loss competition shows,

bariatric surgery programmes, and sensationalised tales about individuals who weigh over the medical measure of "morbid obesity."[5] However, TV networks have also started to cater to the shifting tone of public discourse, opening up pathways to unambiguous fat representations. In this dissertation, I point in particular to a recent fat feminist surge evidenced in fat women-led programmes such as Aidy Bryant and Lolly Adefope's turn in *Shrill* (Hulu 2019-2021) or Joy Nash's short-lived dive into the female psyche in *Dietland* (AMC 2018). These programmes demonstrate new modes of feminist storytelling by upholding subjectivities which are more *explicitly* feminist and subversive than not only the aforementioned twenty-first century texts but also from older fictional iterations of fat seen in shows like *All in the Family* (CBS 1971-1979) or *Roseanne* (ABC 1988 -1997), in which fat bodies are primarily employed to signal class difference.

Among *Shrill* and *Dietland* are a range of shows featuring fat protagonists whose weight serves as an important aspect of their character, such as *This is Us* (NBC 2016 -2022), *Good Trouble* (Freeform 2019-), and *Loosely Exactly Nicole* (3 Arts 2016-2018). These shows each take their own explicit approaches to weight with varying degrees of intensity and to varying effect. Yet, held up together, these programmes appear to successfully address a "narrative scarcity," to borrow the phrase from Viet Thanh Nguyen (2016), of fat women in media. Journalist Samhita Mukhopadhyay (2019) writes for Teen Vogue that *Shrill* is "a revolution for fat representation," for its "profound display of body positivity and the power of having role models and diverse representation." In her celebration of fat heroines in "chick-lit" Lara Frater remarks that "the mere presence of fat women in Bigger Girl Lit is important" whether or not that presence is handled with particular care. "Where else," she asks, "can you find bigger bodies in mainstream media?" (Frater 2009: 239). Still, while there are seductive qualities to the notion of a liberating "narrative plenitude" of fat representation, not *all* visibility is liberating.

Rather, the relationship of visibility to fatness is manifold, as sociologist Jeannine Gailey (2014, 2021) makes clear in her work on large bodies. Drawing upon work in disability studies (Casper & Moore 2009), Gailey uses the term "hyper(in)visibility" to

[5] See Appendix A for a description of size privilege and the different categories of fatness, or "fategories," developed by fat communities online to redress medicalised terms like "morbid obesity."

describe the "seemingly paradoxical social position" fat women inhabit (2014: 6). She argues that a fat person's desires, humanity, and needs are rendered invisible even as their body is subject to intense social scrutiny. Fatness, she says, cannot be hidden; a fat woman cannot pass for thin, but a thin woman can don and remove a fat suit to pass (briefly) for fat. Fat is, as she describes, the "scarlet letter" that marks the fat woman's body as deserving of hyper-scrutiny and fear from peers, medical professionals, and audiences alike (2014: 10). This kind of Othering can become darkly malignant and even potentially violent, whether in material terms or in the symbolic violence of stigma and the notion of fat as creating a "spoiled identity" (Gailey 2021; Goffman 1963; Stoll 2019).

Despite a great deal of research on the effects of anti-fat bias (or weight stigma) - and the many references to its proliferation in media in highbrow publications like *The New York Times* (Cowles 2022; Rabin 2017) and the *Huffington Post* (Hobbes 2018) - there remains very little work on the topic of fat representation in feminist media studies. Fatness is mostly taken for granted in the works that do discuss it; and, when it *is* discussed, attention tends to turn away from actual fat people and toward thin people performing in fat prosthetics. Although slenderness, disordered eating, and the "beauty myth" have been major points of focus for feminist scholars analysing popular texts, fatness, then, has mostly remained invisible in these conversations (Harjunen 2017; Wolf 1990). As a result, a supposedly self-evident spectre of fatness - suggesting that fat is inherently dangerous, immoral, and undesirable - hangs over a great deal of research into representations of not only fat women, but over bodies more broadly. Thus, fat not only goes unnoticed in its particularities, but also ends up being reduced to only the most surface-level engagements (Orgad & Gill 2022).

Still, in recent scholarship in both feminist media studies and in fat studies, there has been more attention paid to fatness. These studies have primarily been engaged in dialogues about abjection or unruliness. This is an understandable and necessary undertaking in trying to theorise the ways in which fat has been used as a marker of disgust (and thus, as a metaphor for any number of social ills). Studies in this vein have looked at the damaging and cruel imagery in reality and makeover shows (Raisborough 2014; Roost 2016; Sender 2012; Subramanian 2013) or outlined the fears and anxieties displayed in news and broadcast media to productive effect, identifying a problematic and thorny element of fat

representation (Cooper 2013; Harjunen 2017; Saguy 2013). However, with this thesis I propose approaching fatness by seeking out its representative qualities and tracing patterns of characterisation in popular culture rather than by yet again using the single lens of abjection or the carnivalesque. By recognising fatness for its representative specificities - rather than by application of a single metaphor - I argue, we can illuminate new avenues of potential for feminist media studies.

This specific attitude toward fat may be novel but it has a solid foundation in a critical feminist media studies built upon the project of recognising the privileges afforded to and disadvantages faced by individuals at multiple axes of identity (Harvey 2020). There is also a foundation for this work in fat studies, wherein addressing fat through interdisciplinary approaches is referred to as "fattening" or "fattening up" research, evoking earlier, more positive uses of the word that connote something filling, satisfying, or otherwise improved (Levy-Navarro 2009; Pausé & Taylor 2021). In this thesis, I take my cue from queer theorists who situate their readings of media within "conventional heterocentrist paradigms" (Doty 1993: xiv). In recognising an imperative toward thinness as a convention, I explore fatness through the discourse that surrounds it and thus situate the subject position of "fat." In doing so, I add to the existing studies of body size and suggest new directions for feminist media studies.

My intervention, then, is found in distancing fat from the omnipresent language of abjection and the carnivalesque and instead working on the project of disentangling fatness from the invisible notions to which readings of large bodies are so often attached in feminist media studies. In line with fat and feminist media studies, I consider bodies as they interact within a framework of biopower, biopedagogy, and biocitizenship. I follow Foucault's thinking - as I address in the next chapter - that the body (in a neoliberal, capitalist context) is "caught up in a system of constraints and privations, obligations and prohibitions" and is meant to act "docile" through the state powers that enable discipline (often through public pedagogy) upon citizens (1977: 11). I see these forces as acting upon fat bodies to a set of particular effects and affects that are reflected in and recycled by contemporary television.

I have chosen to focus on television because it is a medium that takes up and amplifies the contemporary as well as the popular. This is understandably a nebulous reasoning, in part because, as Wayne argues, "in television's streaming age the notion of

popularity has become increasingly ambiguous" (2021: 1). However, there are compelling reasons to look to the popular and the contemporary - as broadly defined as they may be. Analysing the shifts and the progression of fat representation on TV produces new and transgressive potential for criticism of media and for better understanding of fat lived experiences. By thinking about fat as an amalgamation of a great many factors limited within the constraints of a neoliberal, capitalist context, this study aims to open up not only new ways of seeing fat people, but also new ways of theorising contemporary television. As arguments in television studies continue to be preoccupied with, alternately, the "end of television" (Buonanno 2019; Katz & Scannell 2009) and the revolutionary or transformative futures of television (Lotz 2018; Scannell 2020), fat produces a lens - as of now, hardly touched - by which to engage in the project of, as Scannell puts it, conducting a "redemption of experience" as a "starting point for media and cultural studies" (2015: 651).

Scannell argues that lived experience is the sum of an individual's engagement with "the *real* experience of what it is to be alive and living in the *real* world in *real* time and in a *real* place with other *real* people" (651). As a result, when combined with critical reflection, experience enables an understanding of media that is drawn from the embodied realities of daily life. This method is upheld in feminist scholarship, which has turned to embodied analyses to address the problematic binaries presented by patriarchal norms of thought; Elizabeth Grosz (1994) argues for a feminist approach to analysis that conceptualises bodies as existing between dualistic constructions of private/public, social/psychological, and self/other rather than as fixed entities with binary realities. In this thesis, then, I disentangle the ways in which fat realities interact with fat representations and with the tenuous forms and styles of television itself. In doing so from my own lived experience of fatness, I am able to demonstrate how a fattened engagement with feminist media studies can provoke intricate and complicated readings. Within these complications, I suggest, may lie new perspectives and readings for the ways in which - as Amanda Lotz (2014) puts it - the "television will be revolutionized [sic]."

This thesis does not purport to comprehensively discuss every possible example of fat people on the small screen. Although I do look at British texts and employ British scholarship, the focus of my work leans heavily toward American television. I am most familiar with American TV as a result of growing up in the United States and I have had

subscriptions to a number of streaming services for most of my adult life.[6] This is the television with which I am most familiar and with which I am most likely to interact, given my sphere of influence. Additionally, though, there are practical considerations in choosing at times to privilege American texts. American television has regularly proven the most fertile ground for my particular analysis precisely because of the state of US healthcare provisions; as a nation with a privatised and notoriously inaccessible insurance industry, US depictions of fat produce particularly compelling contradictions that help to answer questions about fat as a moral issue. Where issues like the "obesity epidemic" or problems of social stigma are concerned, however, US and UK policies are quite closely linked; this is reflected in the research, as in my first chapter, in which I demonstrate a representative trope that relies on remarkably similar British and American conceptions of fat as a code for an immoral and poor biocitizen.

Still, it would be fair to criticise an overgeneralisation on my part between media from two countries with distinct institutional backgrounds, cultural climates, and regimes of government, to say the least. It is not my aim to directly conflate American and British television on the whole - nor to try and point to some monolithic occurrence of "globalisation" as an excuse (Shahaf & Oren 2011) - but rather to point to the ways in which Western depictions of fatness specifically take on and embody certain characteristics across a range of media texts. This leaves blind spots and gaps in my research that I cannot address here, in particular the oft-cited problem of Western-centricity in scholarship (Cooper 2009; Pausé & Taylor 2021); this study recognises and appreciates but does not directly address this lack. Rather, I draw upon my own experience and research specialties to address the dearth of fat-centric scholarship in feminist media studies. By unfixing my study from a singular genre or overly-medium specific approach, I align with Elana Levine's argument that the televisual medium "need not speak in a single voice to be a factor in the exercise of dominant interests, nor do its audiences need to engage in a single experience of television to make their negotiations with it central to current social, cultural, and political debates" (2011: 177). Thus, in considering examples from British and American television, I open

[6] I have ready access to Netflix (UK & US), Amazon Prime (UK & US), Hulu (US), Disney+ (UK), NowTV (UK), Apple TV (UK), HBO GO (US), All4 (UK), and BBC iPlayer (UK).

inquiry into some of a great many patterns of narrative and representation that emerge in complicated ways across TV formats.

In addition, this research is potentially limited by that which enables it: my position as a fat researcher. The text selection process for this research is based primarily on my own knowledge, drawn from my research into and engagements with fat communities online. While this enables my work to speak to new understandings of television, it could be argued that personal choices might skew my critical analysis. In choosing to eschew categorisation of programmes by genre and format, for example, this work acts against the directives set out by Geraghty (2003) and Jacobs (2001), who both suggest that TV shows are best compared like for like; Jacobs specifically argues that there is a danger of overgeneralisation when scholars write about television more widely without attending to the discrete aims of certain shows and genres. However, while genre categories may appear to be fixed, they are actually quite slippery; as genre critic Jane Feuer (1992) notes, most TV genres are fabricated from preceding theories and historical understandings and thus are not necessarily more empirical than other methods (Butler 2018). In my research, I have not found a particular need to separate genres; rather, I have found that fat bodies appear through many of the same tropes and patterns of representation across forms.

I did not begin this work swayed by the dominant narratives of "obesity" and become, over time, convinced otherwise. Rather, I started with the very intentional aim of deconstructing and illuminating aspects of fat representation that already loomed large in my life as a fat person. This is not to say I have ended my research here with the exact same convictions as I began - quite the opposite, as I discuss at length in my third chapter about the body positivity movement - but rather to note what might in some circles be problematically delimited: I do not believe in the inspirational and moralised stories of weight loss and dieting, I do not adhere to the notion of fatness as a disease, and I do not bend to a cultural ideal of thinness. However, I argue, it is not only in relation to a single, individualised fat identity (in this case, to me) that this study is beneficial; fatness is multifaceted, messy, and flexible, and is thus a powerful tool by which to read the similarly messy medium of TV.

Chapter Outline: The work to come

In the frictional space and tangled, shifting borders of television, then, sits the fat woman's body - a form which troubles neoliberal norms, defies binaries, and resists definition. Within these ambiguities and nuances and upon these ill-defined and messy spaces, my own analyses and methods are troubled by blurred lines, contradictions, and combinations. While I utilise reality television programmes in my case studies, for instance, I also turn to fiction television; while I primarily identify textual tropes and trends through a postfeminist lens, I also shift my gaze through older feminisms and emergent forms; while I draw from the work of critical feminist media scholars, I regularly and joyously herald the research of fat studies scholars and the gains of the fat activist movement; and finally, even while I recognise the ways in which women's fatness is devalued by certain gazes or narrative devices, I seek to revalue my readings of these texts to contribute to the burgeoning effort to reclaim a fattened future, onscreen and off.

To do so, I first conduct a review of literature in order to closely bind feminist media studies with fat studies. My aim here is to demonstrate how we can "fatten" scholarship by broadening the understanding of fat as an intersection of identity and site of cultural production. In suggesting this, I act in accordance with fat studies scholar Cat Pausé and activist Sonya Renee Taylor's call to contribute to work that sits "at the precipice of an emerging world, one where fat bodies and their liberations cannot be disaggregated from the liberation of all oppressions" (2021:13). In this section, then, I present the political foundation for this research (neoliberalism, Foucauldian biopower and biopedagogy), illuminate aspects of relevant feminisms (second-wave feminism, popular feminisms, postfeminisms), and introduce the strands of fat studies and feminist media studies (specifically, television studies) that are integral to the analyses that follow. Here, I also attend to my methods, making reference to my processes of text selection and analysis and providing a foundation for my critical framework, within which I seek out "incrustations" (notions, ideas, and images that build up around a concept or text) and "turning points" (shifts in representation that help illuminate epistemological foundations).

This thesis is then divided into three primary chapters, in which analysis moves between fiction and reality television in order to provide a comprehensive view of this

particular moment for fatness in (relatively) popular TV. Each chapter contains a set of case studies from television aired within the last decade, with some leniency for particularly relevant supporting examples; for instance, I discuss the use of fat suits in older TV in the first chapter to lay the groundwork for my primary analyses. For my case studies, I have selected a broad range of texts, choosing not to limit my thinking to either reality television or fiction. I mention this often because I am aware that the fat body is perhaps most transparent in reality TV, where weight (and, more specifically, weight loss) sits very explicitly at the centre of discussion. However, this thesis takes the position that, whether they frame stories as fiction or as "real," televisual texts are constructed and narrativised in illuminating ways and thus need not be separated from one another.

In the first analysis chapter, "Resubstantiating the Thin Woman Within," I look across British and American televisual genres from reality TV to the light-hearted sitcom in order to trace what I term the "thin woman within," a cultural trope that frames fat women as thin women who are trapped inside the shells of their fat bodies. In doing so, I open up discussion on proper biocitizenship (Harwood 2012; Greenhalgh 2015) and illuminate a moral framework that binds fat women to a liminal state of being (Harjunen 2009; Gailey & Harjunen 2019) where they are, at best, considered citizens "in progress" and at worst considered failed- or anti-citizens. I look to a range of texts - *My Mad Fat Diary* (E4 2013-2015), *Fat: the Fight of My Life* (BBC One 2013), *My 600-Lb Life, Drop Dead Diva* (Lifetime 2009-2014) - to understand the cultural implications and the complex interplay between TV, fatness, and an overwhelming sense of liminality, questioning both the depiction of "real" lived experience and the prosthetic depiction of fat.

This chapter asks questions about the liminality of - and the hazy boundaries between - fat bodies displayed through an onscreen paradigm of thinness. I interrogate the effects of detaching and pathologising fat in relation to embodied experience, outlining the manners in which fat is prostheticised and depersonalised on TV. In particular, my critical framework for this chapter relies on the articulations of disability scholars on unpacking narrative devices of deviation (Mitchell & Snyder 2000) as well as on cracking open "ways of seeing" non-normative bodies onscreen (Garland-Thomson 2002, 2006). In identifying the trope of the thin woman within, I uncover patterns of representation that act to conceal fatness as a multivalent and ambiguous lived experience in modern media. Because of a renewed focus

on the individual in a neoliberal context, I argue, liminality here vividly evokes how the performance of thinness (including of being on-the-way to thinness) has become a pre-requisite for (bio)citizenship.

Next, in "Television in the Home; Fatness in the Family," I interrogate what I call "fat-involved" mother-daughter relationships; in other words, I analyse TV mothers and daughters who explicitly navigate and negotiate fatness within their relationship. Following influential work on television and its ties to femininity and domesticity (Buonanno 2019; Fiske 1987; Spigel 1988; Williams 1984), I trace the manner in which fat intensifies existing paradigms between families and question the effects of the long-held myth of motherhood that places the mother-daughter relationship within a cyclical framework of separation and initiation. I first work through the example of reality television pair Mama June and Honey Boo Boo to demonstrate the intricacies of this cyclical pattern, with a focus on the way in which their lower-class status interacts with the "dirt" of reality TV (West 2011). I then broaden the scope to middle-class women-centric dramedy and melodrama, referring to *Shrill* (2019-2021) and *This is Us* (2016-2022) to articulate the meanings of fat in relation to a higher-class status that is often conflated with whiteness. In this chapter, I rely on feminist writing about motherhood, domesticity, and morality as expressed through the mother-daughter dyad on TV. I refer back to tensions in second wave feminist writing on mothering (Collins 1987; Rich 1976; Williams 1984) and then bind these to discussions of serial storytelling (Buonanno 2019; Caughie 1991; Joyrich 2014) in order to establish the ways in which fatness interrupts and enhances the fat-involved mother-daughter relationship. In this chapter, I also ask questions about the effects produced by the manner in which gender, race, and class intersect within the familiar narrative pattern of retreat and return.

Finally, in "(Un)apologetic Fatties on Woke TV," I work through the ideas embedded in the popular Body Positivity Movement (#BoPo) and unpick the contradictions presented by woke images and narratives - that is, stories that are expressly alert to popular issues of social justice.[7] To do so, I consider a poetics and aesthetics of self-love and "awakening" that permeates contemporary TV, from the women-centric dramedy to a recent spate of

[7] The term "woke" originated in African-American civil rights activism to refer to awareness of racial prejudice and injustice; most recently the term has been popularised by the Black Lives Matter movement ("woke, adj. 2" n.d.)

reality television reboots. Operating through the understanding of social justice narratives in TV as often representing a matter of profitability and popularity (Warner 2017; Sobande 2019), I question the tendency toward universalising fat narratives through the hegemonic process of wokeness; I also criticise the ideals of positivity and optimism - in particular claims that "the body is not an apology" (Renee Taylor 2018) - embedded in self-help and informal fat writing. Here, I unpack particularly thorny scenes from *Shrill*, relying on Kristen Warner's (2017) work on a politics of representation. I then turn to fat studies scholars Abigail Saguy (2017) and Gemma Gibson (2021) to articulate "acceptable" performances of fatness, identifying the figure of the "good fatty," who is a fat person who appears to conform to a dominant "obesity" rhetoric by expressing femininity and attempting to lose weight or perform healthiness. Progressing from this analysis, I then turn to the recent reboots of weight-loss competition show *Biggest Loser* (USA 2020-) and makeover programme *Queer Eye* (Netflix 2018-), whose Liberal, shiny exteriors belie darker connotations in relation to wellness and the intertwining issues of consumption that accompany a socially acceptable performance of health and happiness.

Together, these chapters allow me to work over the boundaries between context and text, chipping away at the incrustations built up around stories about fat. By introducing a representative trope of fatness - the thin woman within - I present an argument for fat as a narrative creation. I demonstrate that it is both possible and useful to, as I argue, "resubstantiate" fat - or, in other words, to reconnect our understandings of fatness with the lived (and political) realities associated with dominant shared cultural narratives about body size. By investigating the televisual imagery and textual expression of fat-involved familial relationships onscreen, I then break open and explore the boundaries between fatness and intergenerational feminisms. Finally, by interrogating wokeness through the frames of body positivity and wellness, I question the efficacy of the movements that have defined a popular response to tropes of fatness; here, I criticise the popular body positivity movement and debate the potential of "self-love" as a method of activism. Thinking of Karen Boyle's (2005) caution about media scholarship that attempts to determine the level to which a text is or is not "feminist," I repeatedly question (sometimes explicitly, as in my reflection in the third chapter) my own impulse to land on binary answers about fat representation. As I will explore further in the upcoming review of literature, my methodological framework

understands these varying objects of analysis - from a single representative trope to the loftier ideological expressions of the body positivity movement - as comprising merely a few of the incrustations that build up around depictions of fatness.

Overall, then, this thesis provides a wide-ranging and nuanced criticism of the ways in which fat bodies have been conceptualised and represented on American and British television over, broadly, the last decade (2010 - 2022). Across this work, I argue that concerted study of fatness holds a great deal of potential; indeed, as I have started to demonstrate here, the process of fattening research is necessary in reading a media landscape that repositions itself so ambivalently, both upholding and defying hegemonic norms of body size. As Marilyn Wann (2009: xxi, *emphasis mine*) notes of the potential to be found in employing fat-informed analysis:

> Amid such crushing social coercion and control [of anti-fat bias], the field of fat studies can offer a revelatory new lens on the central human question of embodiment, a theoretical approach that will have direct political and social effects. Like feminist studies, queer studies, and disability studies, which consider gender, sexuality, or functional difference, *fat studies can show us who we are via the lens of weight*.

Following Wann and the many other fat studies scholars undertaking similar projects across disciplines, I argue that fat is more than just an identity that stands in uncomfortable opposition to thinness. Rather, fat is a useful lens that enables practical applications, many of which have yet to be explored in all but the vaguest detail. In harnessing the power of this lens in this project, then, I not only open up inquiry into an underexplored topic but also present new directions for feminist media studies and television studies more widely.

Literature Review and Methodology: "Fattening" Feminist TV Research

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the release of the edited collection "Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression" (Braziel & LeBesco 2001) marked one of the earliest large-scale scholarly attempts to aggregate thinking on social representations of fat in media. Responding to a glut of pathologising psychology texts that conceptualised the fat body as "a blank slate onto which the psyche's contents are transcribed or written" (4), a rising tide of scientific "obesity" research, and an inclination in feminist scholarship to privilege discussion of very thin bodies (i.e., the "tyranny of slenderness" in Bordo (1993)) Braziel and LeBesco's collection demonstrated how representations of fat could be conceptualised as radical and transgressive and proved that fat bodies could constitute substantial objects of study. Articles in the collection looked at everything from the intricacies of fat performance, method acting, and gender (Mosher 2001; Mazer 2001) to the power of carnivalesque and grotesque fat representations in media and culture (Stukator 2001; Braziel 2001). In doing so, the collection set the stage for a number of ensuing efforts to not only unpack issues of fat representation in media, but also to recognise fat as a productive site of analysis in the twenty-first century.

Since that time, a number of foundational texts in the discipline of fat studies have been published that extend, reconfigure, and complicate the critiques put forward in "Bodies Out of Bounds." The most prominent of these include "The Fat Studies Reader" (Rothblum & Solovay 2009) and, more recently, "The Routledge International Handbook of Fat Studies" (Pausé & Taylor 2021). These contemporary collections embody an interdisciplinary approach to research that share with their predecessor a desire for the liberation of fat people from a culture of shame, blame, and dangerous pathologising. There are, in these pages, a number of engagements with fat representation in popular culture from fat heroines in chick lit (Frater 2009) and fat celebrity icons (Bernstein & St. John 2009) to the wider role of fat in media (Kyrölä 2021). The latest collection (Pausé & Taylor 2021) engages even more explicitly than the former on intersectional approaches to fat, binding concepts like Afrofuturism (Shackelford 2021), decolonisation (Choudhury 2021), and queer identities (Orchard 2021, Taylor 2021, White 2021) to fat representation and lived

experience; the effects of fat oppression, these studies reinforce, cut across and through categories of age, race, sex, gender and ability. In emphasising intersectionality and interdisciplinarity, then, the collections reflect a shared aim in contemporary fat studies to "fatten" (or "fatten up") scholarship (Levy-Navarro 2009; Pausé & Taylor 2021).

As fat studies scholar Hannele Harjunen argues provocatively: the fat body has, until recently, been "present but absent" in academic work and popular culture alike (2017: 4). The far-reaching effects and haunting affectations of fat have not gone so much unnoticed, she explains, as "unnamed." Thus, the process of fattening research involves (re)claiming fat deconstruction as a useful feminist method, upholding fatness as more than simply an identity category or a medicalised state of being. Instead, fat must be understood as a social construction that is surrounded by (productive) public and private emotions, or what might be termed affects. Studies of affect, as Gregg and Siegworth (2010) delineate them, can attend to a very wide range of inter-implications between physical bodies and actions, cognitions, experiences, and beliefs with varying degrees of intensity and specificity. In the present work, affects are perhaps best understood as that which can be addressed by attending to:

> the hard and fast materialities, as well as the fleeting and flowing ephemera, of the daily and the workaday, of everyday and every-night life, and of ''experience'' (understood in ways far more collective and ''external'' rather than individual and interior), where persistent, repetitious practices of power can simultaneously provide a body (or, better, collectivized bodies) with predicaments and potentials for realizing a world that subsists within and exceeds the horizons and boundaries of the norm (7).

In the last twenty years, contemporary media scholarship has shown a "turn to affect," in which theories about popular culture - and, particularly, about iterative (and often, participatory) media such as television - have opened up discussion about the many ways in which emotions, feelings, and sentiments shape and guide social life (Clough & Halley 2007). Affective considerations can be vague, and thus are arguably most useful when marrying thoughts about popular discourse and imagery to embodied political and social realities. Margaret Wetherell has described this as an "affective-discursive" approach to

analysis, rejecting the idea that affect is a "pre-personal and extra-discursive force hitting and shaping bodies" and arguing, as Orgad and Gill (2022) do as well, that affect is "social, patterned, and implicated in power relations" (Wetherall 2015: 141).

With this in mind, this literature review provides an overview of the extant practices of power as well as some of the predicaments and potentials faced by fat populations in a Western world clinging to the fraught and often highly emotional narratives of the obesity epidemic. Because each of the coming chapters provide in-depth inquiries into more specific and relevant literature, the purpose of this formal review is to establish a critical foundation for the coming interrogation of large bodies on small screens. For purposes of clarity, I first attend to my thoughts on methodology and text selection. Throughout this review, I address Harjunen's naming of fat literally, beginning with a discussion of key terms and concepts central to my analyses. In the first section, I present a case for conceptualising the present moment through the (slippery, ambivalent) frame of "neoliberalism," and outline my understanding of "biopower," "biopedagogy," and "biocitizenship" in relation to fat, providing a brief historical overview of fat studies and the concepts embedded within. I follow this with a disciplinary overview of key thinking in feminist media studies. Here, I define the various feminisms that underpin my analyses, with particular attention toward the postfeminist sensibility and its relationship to second-wave and popular feminisms. I also outline changes in the study of fatness on television, specifically grounding my object of study in this critical framework. Throughout, I will argue that my efforts to fatten media studies are not only *comparable* to similar efforts in disability, critical race, age, and queer studies; rather, they *rely upon* and are formed by the gains made and knowledge shared in these arenas. In this review, then, I also make note of the positions and perspectives that affect and direct the forthcoming analyses and my overall methodology. In this manner, I lay the groundwork for the ensuing analyses of fat and TV, in which my concerted aim is to demonstrate the transgressive and compelling powers of fatness in application to (and in partnership with) feminist media studies.

“The Wreck is in Danger”: Notes on Method

Recently, in considering how I might best summate my methodology with a tidy metaphor, I explored the collision of two primary concepts which have repeatedly surfaced in my research: incrustations and turning points. In this thesis, I regularly locate “turning points” in TV texts in looking to the shifts in before-and-after images of weight, intergenerational feminisms in families, and moves toward body positivity and a woke politics in popular texts. In examining the turnings of these concepts, my research has loosened some of the “incrustations” that surround - and often seem to render immobile - such turning points. These concepts are grounded in studies of gender and media, where scholars have long decried the limitations of traditional, purely psychoanalytic textual analysis. For example, writing of blockbuster franchise cinema, Tony Bennett argues for the importance of seeking out “the *incrustations* that have been built up around a text,” postulating that “except as a methodological fiction, that text does not have any existence that is separable from such incrustations” (1982: 9). Gender and media scholar Julie D’Acci employs the concept of incrustations to describe a problem in television studies, which she argues ignores “specificities of the televisual form” that are inseparable from images (2004: 422). These critiques remain relevant in studies of television where issues of “medium specificity” and arguments over “narrative complexity” (Mittell 2006) and “quality TV” often cloud analysis without regard for the many intersections of many contexts; we may instead ask - as media scholar Alfred L. Martin Jr. queries - why intersectional studies of TV “stop [their] examinations at the level of the text without consideration of these incrustations” (2020: 69). The notion of “plus size” or “overweight” bodies very often stands in comparison to a body with “normal” size or “average” weight, just as Blackness is constructed against whiteness, disability against ability, and queerness against straightness. A view toward loosening incrustations is one which acknowledges these well-held binaries without relying on or expecting a simple answer toward any given example.

My analyses, then, take the position that binary arguments (i.e. those which assign texts and characters as feminist or non-feminist, racist or progressive, “good” or “bad”) create limitations to a nuanced consideration of onscreen representation. At the risk of invoking more intricate arguments about the importance of medium specificity - so often the straw man for arguments that qualitative study of television is unworthy of rigorous attention

- one of my aims is to consider context and text not as two separate considerations which inform one another, but as one unit that is inextricably linked in a complex, non-binary manner. This is necessary, I argue, in interrogating texts for their depictions of and engagements with difference and Otherness. Indeed, as Judith Butler posits*: "*[t]he context is not exterior to the question; it conditions the form that the question will take" (2005: 3). Although Butler is here speaking about a modern ethics and the false promise of universality, her broader argument is one that echoes across disciplines. Where there are moments of upheaval and change that proffer political and social threat (turning points), there are contextual clues, images, choices, and narratives that present themselves for an interrogation that aims not to fix them into some defined binary category but rather to *slowly* chip them away (incrustations).

Thinking through this conceptual collision conjured a long-forgotten image from a much-hyped 2000's television documentary recording James Cameron's expedition to photograph the Titanic during the making of the titular film. The image, I recalled, was of a bright beam of light from a submersible craft, passing over a rusted and barnacle-laden wheel-shaped door handle. If I could find the exact image, I thought I could better evoke the ways in which my methods seek to illuminate both incrustations (rust, barnacles) and turning points (the round door handle). Trying briefly to chase that impulse, I searched for the video and instead came upon something unexpected: a fear-mongering Channel 4 documentary reporting on the various expeditions and studies of the ship entitled *Titanic: Into the Heart of the Wreck* (2021). The documentary spends the bulk of its time flashing between interviews with James Cameron and a series of experts on microbiology, submersible photography, and oceanography, discussing images of the wreck throughout time.

As the TV special nears its close, a very serious narrator warns that "the wreck is in danger - at the mercy of an invisible enemy" despite efforts to slow the "bacteria, oxygen corrosion, and currents" that are causing "irreversible damage to the steel colossus." Emotionally-charged orchestral music adds an element of horror as one expert on the subject calmly issues a warning of how "the future of the wreck could progress." The music then picks up speed, bopping with a low and persistent warning sound as a simulated pattern of decay - via, "for the first time," 3D animated footage - whizzes the remaining metals and rusts off the ship's tall masts and bow; the stacked decks collapse onto one another "like a

house of cards" as it transforms "from wreck into sediment." The experts, in voiceover, reassuringly chime in once more as the music lifts to a hopeful tenor: "the degradation of Titanic" they explain, "will probably never stop."

I was moved by this bizarre emotional appeal to preservation of a ship best-known for its catastrophic destruction more than a century earlier. For, although it may seem disjointed from my topic of study, I see this "Titanic panic" as indicative of multiple aspects of my own methodology and approach to research. On the one hand, the discovery of this clip - initially facilitated through reliance on my own imprecise memory - points to potential flaws in my research; as a fat scholar with significant investment in online fat communities, I have a tendency to rely on my own interpretations of media and utilise my own experiences and emotions as a starting point for research. Importantly, though, the obvious futility of the Titanic hand-wringing speaks more to my purposes as a researcher than the image I originally sought. Everywhere I turn on television - whether watching Annie Easton skate around a roller-rink in a state of perpetual adolescence in *Shrill* or diving into reality show *Fight of my Life* to find deep anxieties over fat woman Leanne's future as a mother or stumbling upon a TV documentary about a shipwreck's decay - there lies a deep and abiding appeal to emotion and fear that has become so routine as to form, perhaps, its own "invisible enemy."

This is nothing new, of course. Henry Jenkins describes the function and necessity of "emotional intensification" on TV (2007: 3); Patricia Mellencamp tells us that "anxiety *is* television's affect" and that "television is a machine capitalizing on the fear of the passage of time" (1990: 243). Not incidentally, Mellencamp also invokes the sinking of the Titanic in describing the kind of "invisible, international crisis" that TV wields as it "urges us to stay home, to keep watching." Fatness, too, is married to these discomforts of destruction and fear as a result of the moral panic and outrage provoked by a (supposed) global obesity crisis. The notion of fat bodies as bodies in catastrophe seems to "testify to the inertia of the real and television's privileged relation to it," by continually legitimising the crisis-oriented discursive patterns of TV (Doane 1990). As Sontag famously wrote of the cultural imagination of disaster: "we live under continual threat of two equally fearful, but seemingly opposed, destinies: unremitting banality and inconceivable terror" (1965: 42). Removed from its home on the floor of the sea, the colossal Titanic becomes little more than decaying

steel, losing its power and significance as a crisis encapsulated for visual pleasure; to stoke televisual concern, Titanic must be situated in "the time of the now" to configure a sense that there might be "a revolutionary chance" at its salvation (Mellencamp 1990).

Taking into consideration this kind of anxiety, I utilise this example here to emphasise my aim in working through the framework of incrustations. This thesis places a spotlight on fatness, illuminating the convoluted desperation that surrounds depictions of fat on TV (embodied by morbid anxieties as meaningless as those espoused by the so-called Titanic experts). Just as the Titanic's eternal connection to disaster and to enormity continues to foster fear and anxiety both on and off-screen, so does the fat body. Fears about fat, as I will detail in the coming pages, rely on a suite of misinformation and heightened emotions that point directly to the same cultural impulse that suggests a moral failing and, worse, a large-scale public crisis. And still, representations of the fat body in popular culture have often been defined by a "wreck" (the fat body) that continues - despite having *already* famously failed - to foster legitimate concern over a decaying future (getting fatter, remaining fat). In chipping away at the incrustations surrounding the wreck, I wonder at the ever-present fear of decay and of the scramble to define appropriate bounds to living and existence. I wonder whether dragging fatness up and into the light - as Žižek argues of its enormous ancestor at the bottom of the sea - might render it less a crisis and more a kind of formless and unidentifiable sediment: the stuff of everyday life (1989).

Methodologically, I approach this project using the semiotic processes of feminist textual analysis. Throughout, I rely on approaches from critical race, queer, and disability studies which produce useful lenses by which to think through representative tropes and narrative patterns (e.g., "narrative prosthesis" (Mitchell & Snyder 2000); the "cult of true womanhood" and white supremacist ideologies of motherhood (Collins 2000; Carby 1982); politics of visibility (Shacklock 2019; Warner 2017)). I also take an autoethnographic approach to the final chapter of this thesis, in which I open up space for my own concerns regarding contemporary fat representation. Personal accounts provide a potentially slippery method for scholarly work, opening up concerns about academic writing that is "insufficiently rigorous, theoretical, and analytical, and too aesthetic, emotional, and

therapeutic" (Ellis et al. 2011: 283; see also: hooks 1994; Keller 1995). Throughout the sections of personal intertextual reflection, however, I work to consider not a single "universal truth" of fatness but rather to capture aspects of the "messy, uncertain, and emotional" bounds of fatness (Adams et al. 2015: 24), seeking out the "effects that linger" in the many overlapping iterations of fat representation on the small screen (Ellis et al. 284)).

A Brief Note on Text Selection

My criteria for selecting texts to read closely did not rely on cordoning off works by genre or format (e.g., broadcast vs. streaming), but rather by time period (British and American texts airing after 2010, with some allowances) and by a persistent engagement with fatness (that is, a prominent character or set of characters for whom fatness and/or fat identity clearly influences the text). For the purposes of this thesis, I was most interested in considering programmes where characters or participants discussed their fatness and where body size constituted a primary aspect of their subjectivity. These criteria proved fruitful in producing a number of viable options, which I then narrowed down by attending to texts that were popular in fat communities or in thin backlash online. This measure based on my extensive research into online newspapers and magazines as well as social media posts and comments and is enabled by my existing ties to a number of fat activist, fa(t)shion, and body positivity groups. I searched for texts that presented ample material for analysis, privileging in-depth analysis of longer running shows or characters (*Drop Dead Diva, This is Us*, *My 600-Lb Life*, and the many shows featuring Honey Boo Boo) over short-lived TV documentaries or limited series, though these were sometimes useful.

Neoliberalism and Biopower: Forming and framing fat individuals

I employ the term "neoliberalism" throughout this thesis as a broad descriptor for a climate of self-governance and individualism in the United States and United Kingdom. Our modern iteration of neoliberal governance is widely understood to have stemmed from

Reagan and Thatcher-era conservative economic philosophies that have led to actions of "deregulation, privatisation, and the withdrawal of the state from social provision" (Evans 2015: 40; Palley 2005: 20). Given the breadth and depth of the economic and social state it purports to describe, neoliberalism is an understandably evasive concept that has nonetheless become ubiquitous in contemporary critical discourse, particularly in the humanities (Flew 2014; Springer 2012: 135). The very use of the term has been - and continues to be - debated for being "oft-invoked, but ill-defined," used as a placeholder for more complex analyses of socioeconomic conditions that stretch back to the term's inception in the 1930s (Mudge 2008). However, many scholars in both fat studies and critical feminist media studies continue to argue the proliferation of the term in the academy has enabled a method of speaking about social constructs and (a)politicisms which are otherwise obscured by vague phrases and titles such as "second modernity" or even the potentially more precise "consumer capitalism" (McRobbie 2009).

In keeping with the language of the humanities scholars before me, I understand neoliberalism as David Harvey, influential scholar of economics and author of the heavily-cited "A Brief History of Neoliberalism" (2005), defines it. Harvey argues that:

> [neoliberalism is] a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade (2).

Under these conditions, he posits, the neoliberal subject is a person who is continually positioned as "free to choose" and to self-govern. Alluring as this image of freedom may seem, Harvey argues that the neoliberal subject is actually then indirectly governed through free markets and consumer politics. In other words, instead of "being coerced by direct disciplinary surveillance by the state, individuals now willingly and actively self-govern in a climate enabled by the state" (Chen 2013: 5). Since neoliberalism as a form of indirect government responds to the capitalistic demands of the free market rather than to social welfare or public health concerns, the advancement of neoliberal politics manifests extensive consequences such as "increases in inequality, deterioration of public services, and a drop in the quality of life for those most vulnerable members of society" (Evans 2015: 41; Ferguson

2009: 170). In the recently published "International Handbook of Fat Studies," Pausé and Taylor (2021) further argue that the "adoption of a neoliberal rationale affects not only public structures and institutions" but also private lives; "a neoliberal way of thinking," they contend, "has entered even the most intimate parts of life such as eating, exercising, and taking care of the body" (8).

The individual measurement of health, then, becomes not only a neoliberal capitalist issue in which health is measured by a person's ability to work (Harvey 1998) that hinges on the moral matters of choice and willpower (Garland-Thomson 2002); the individual body also signifies broader structures power in communities, where citizenship becomes "biocitizenship" under a regime of "biopower" (Foucault 1978; Greenhalgh 2012; Happe et al. 2018; Rose & Novas 2005). For Michel Foucault (1978: 138), who most prominently positions biopower as interlinked with structures of governance, the emergence of neoliberalism has meant that "the ancient right to take life or let live was replaced by a power to foster life or disallow it to the point of death." In other words, as queer scholar Lauren Berlant rephrases it, biopower represents the "relative passivity of letting die in the context of shaping living" (2011: 97). Biopower, then, is a structure of power disseminated through biopedagogical cultural discourse which crafts individuals into what Rose and Novas define as biocitizens, or those "who internalize [sic] instructions for managing their bodies/selves in order to optimize [sic] their health and happiness, increase their productivity, and strengthen society" (2005: 432). Effective or "good" biocitizenship is characterised by an expectation that biocitizens care for themselves in such a manner as to "save the state from being forced to pay for costly biotechnological or social interventions and supports in order to improve the individual's health, happiness, and fitness, or to prevent unproductivity and death" (Macdonald et al. 2010; Rose & Novas 2005: 432).

The frame of biopower allows us to view the ways in which population management and individual optimisation sit at the heart of political and juridical strategies as well as how identities are formed around the degree to which individuals conform to the expectations of good biocitizenship. Biopower policies and attitudes view populations as biopolitical entities that can "improve" through state-wide management of birth, death, health, race, gender, sexuality, and size in such a way as to "foster life" and strengthen national interests at a global scale (Rogers et al. 2013). Tools of biopower, then, have historically set out to

measure the "average man" in order to optimise whole societies based on a "normal" profile; there are many examples of this in the 19th and early 20th centuries, particularly in (ostensibly scientific) eugenics research that situated average bodies within a racial profile, taking the measure of bodily characteristics such as head size (phrenology, craniometry), body shape (somatotypology), hair texture (Eugen Fischer's hair colour gauge), and face shape (anthropometry, physiognomy) as evidence of emotional and psychological defects that could be "solved" through "better breeding" (Bashford & Levine 2010; Stern 2016).

The legacy of these measures stretches on today, owing to the scientific-seeming rationale that would come to define what we now think of as "race" (Saini 2019). In relation to fatness specifically, perhaps the most prominent and lasting measure from this era is the Quetelet Index, now widely known as the Body Mass Index (BMI); Belgian statistician Adolphe Quetelet reverse-engineered the BMI to measure the "average man" (who he saw as synonymous with the "ideal" man) based on studies of Scottish and French men's body types. The BMI is now very widely used to, purportedly, measure an individual's general health based on their weight in kilograms divided by the square of their height in metres (Donnelly 2015; Gordon 2020; Huistra 2017). However, owing to its simplicity and to its racist methodological origins, the BMI does not account for human variance outside a model of white adult European men's bodies. Thus, bodies that are shaped differently from this model - for example, many Black African women - are pathologised on sight, without accounting for other metrics of health. The BMI fell out of favour for many years but was resurrected by nutrition physician Ancel Keys in 1972 (Keys et al. 1972). Since that time, more than 150,000 articles in leading scientific journals have referenced the BMI; its adoption by the contemporary scientific community reflects the way in which the BMI has become "reified… as *the* measure of obesity" (Frelick 2013: 10). The notion of BMI as an objective - and cost-effective - medical tool has legitimised "obesity" as, simultaneously, "a disease, a risk factor, comorbidity, and epidemic" (Gutin 2018: 257). The "cultural authority afforded by its use in science and medicine," Gutin argues, is "further compounded by the public's ability to quickly interpret research using BMI" (2018: 258). In other words, the seeming straightforward nature of the BMI has rendered it a measure of common sense.

Thus, "obesity" - a category of personhood designed in direct relation to Quetelet's idea of under- and over-weight bodies as those which are "not ideal" - has become

entrenched in contemporary public health practice, education, and policy-making; in turn, fat people as a group have become stigmatised (and thus, marginalised) as a result of their failure to perform good health and well-being (Bacon & Aphramor 2009; Colls & Evans 2013; Gutin 2018). The consequences of this are reflected in the language surrounding fat identity. "Fat" is, at least in some circles, considered a "four-letter word" associated with cruelty and bullying rather than transgressive potential (McPherson et al. 2018; Puhl 2020). In a recent turn toward "person-centred" language in health-related fields, some institutional resources advocate instead for the use of phrases such as "people *with* obesity" (Obesity Action Coalition, n.d.; Palad & Stanford 2018).[1] Meanwhile, in the service of polite conversation, people turn from the weighty term to the lighter euphemism, describing fat people as plus-sized, chubby, plump, or even "Ruben-esque" (Meadows & Daníelsdóttir 2016; Saguy & Ward 2011).

While evasive approaches to language about weight may be well-intentioned, they demonstrate a tendency to divorce the lived experience of fatness from preconceptions about what fatness actually means. In other words, speaking around the word "fat" instead of using it plainly has the effect of, as fat activists and scholars argue, occluding fat as a reality and reinforcing negative connotations (Cooper 2012; Gordon 2020; Pausé et al. 2013). "Obesity," for example, is a clinical term that connotes population-level epidemic health crises and disease, while "overweight" and "plus-sized" suggest the existence of a "normal" weight or appropriate size. Person-centred language has a similar effect, with phrasing such as "person with overweight" suggesting medical trauma and suffering rather than a state of being that can result from any number of factors (Freeman 2020; Lupton 2018; Wann 2009). Further, although "o-words" may seem fixed into medical frameworks with unfaltering scientific definitions, they actually vary widely across time and sociocultural contexts. In 1998, for example, following the World Health Organisation (WHO), the National Institutes of Health in the United States reduced the BMI cut-off between "normal" and "overweight" from 27.8 to a round 25 (NIH Evidence Report 1998); overnight, millions of previously-normal Americans became medically overweight (Nuttall 2015). Euphemistic terms can also

[1] This is a response to the ways in which traditional "obesity scholarship" has tended to anonymise and abjectify fat people, preferring to focus on morbidity rather than on quality of life (Pausé & Taylor 2021).

be misleading; while the average dress size in the UK is a size 16, most fashion retailers define any size above 14 as part of their "plus-size" range - if they cater to that range at all (Kinsey 2021).

Still, "obesity" continues to be widely considered a straightforward indicator of overall health. It is true that "nearly every population-study finds that fat people have worse cardiovascular health than slim people," but this again points to the ways in which fatness is constructed in relation to biocitizenship as individual experiences do not map neatly onto large-scale claims like these (Freeman 2020: 13). Many fat people are "metabolically healthy," and do not experience the problems of high blood pressure, elevated cholesterol, or insulin resistance attributed to high BMI (Rey-Lopez 2014; Phelan et al. 2015). Indeed, some have argued that the health outcomes associated with fatness might be better understood as stemming from the social stigma promoted by institutions of public health; independent of BMI, the stress associated with fat stigma has been shown to increase cortisol, blood pressure, and inflammation in tandem with a life-threatening impact on mental health (Freeman 2020: 13; Muennig 2008; Himmelstein et al. 2015; Lee & Pausé 2016). Still, as fat studies scholar Gemma Gibson (2021) argues, even when fatness is understood by medical professionals as a stigmatised condition, medical approaches to fatness often continue to uphold an imperative on fat people to perform good health in order to be accepted socially. For instance, Gibson sees approaches like Health at Every Size (HAES) – a medical approach rooted in body positivity that promotes eating and exercise modified to suit any weight - as resorting to "healthism," or "the moral imperative to be healthy and pursue health" (2021; Saguy 2013: 63). This imperative dovetails with the requirements for good biocitizenship and points back, once again, to the problematic frameworks by which we currently view body size.

Fat scholars, then, have worked to demonstrate how a culture of shame and stigma directly costs not life but *quality* of life, suggesting that addressing this problem entails a deconstruction of capitalist entwinements at an industrial level. Part of this work has been to strategically essentialise fat as an identity group, reclaiming (and thus, defanging) both the word "fat" and the discussion around fat experience. There is a consensus among scholars that, unlike the simple lines drawn by the WHO, there is no BMI number or bust measurement that accurately represents the border between those who are fat and those who

are thin. Instead, in this thesis (in line with writing in fat studies), fatness is defined with loose parameters of self-identification designed to accommodate the lived realities associated with fat identity (Cooper 2016; Pausé et al. 2014; Pausé & Taylor 2021). Fat people can be understood as those who, in some combination, have been: unable to shop for clothing in brick-and-mortar stores, harassed or abused for their size, advised repeatedly to diet and exercise, fetishised without consent, put on diets from a young age, ignored in the doctor's office, sent away to "fat camp" (Gordon 2017, 2020). These encounters with anti-fat bias are not exhaustive; rather, I list them here to demonstrate the wide range of possible experiences that might categorise or define a fat identity and to recognise how that identity is formed not by a shared political ethos, but by the (virulent) discourse that shapes meaning. As Stuart Hall (2011: 4) puts it:

> Precisely because identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies… thus [they] are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identical, naturally-constituted unity – an 'identity' in its traditional meaning (that is, an all-inclusive sameness, seamless, without internal differentiation).

Following Hall, we can better understand fat by the kind of opposition commonly associated with it. Words that suggest the opposite of fat include: thin, attractive, energetic, smart, sexy. Fat *people*, then, are those who evoke this difference, and in doing so embody harsh realities associated with modern life in the US and UK. MaryAnn Kozlowski sums up the nebulous - but sticky - position of a fat identification, arguing that "once you are told you are fat, whether it is by a doctor or a lover or a random person on the street, it is a difficult identifier to shake off" (2019: 187).

Reclamation of the term has been a part of the effort to reduce shame by neutralising the stigma attached to bodily descriptors. This fight serves as a major pillar of the fat activist movement - marked in fat studies as beginning with the 1967 Central Park "Fat-In" (a peaceful protest by a small group of fat people) and the subsequent founding of the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA) in 1969 (see: Charlotte Cooper's 2012

"Queer and Fat Activist Timeline").[2] The forced shared experience of fatness has prompted the work to neutralise fat as a valid state-of-being, making fat comparable to other self-descriptions like tall, blonde, or brown-eyed; this effort is similar to - and overlaps with - that around the word "queer," not only in the reframing of a slur into an everyday term, but also in the ways in which fat identity is shaped individually.[3] Writing about the queerness of fat, for example, Kathleen LeBesco (2004) notes that fat activists share "the experience of *coming out as* fat and choosing to no longer pass as on-the-way-to thin'' (LeBesco 2004: 95, emphasis mine; Saguy & Ward 2011). Activist Marilyn Wann, prominent in fat studies for her popular zine and autobiographical book "Fat!So?" (1998) is said to have reformulated the ACT-up and Queer Nation mantra "We're here, we're queer, get used to it!" as: "We're here, we're spheres! Get used to it!" (Burkeman 1998, ctd. in LeBesco 2004). Eve Kosofky Sedgwick (1994) makes this connection explicit as well in her early explorations of queer bodies. Sedgwick famously connected fat and queer (trans) identities in their shared relation to fixed neoliberal frameworks, arguing:

> Nobody knows more fully, more fatalistically than a fat woman how unbridgeable the gap is between the self we see and the self as whom we are seen… and no one can appreciate more fervently the act of magical faith by which it may be possible, at last, to assert and believe, against every social possibility, that the self we see can be made visible as if through our own eyes to the people who see us" (250-251).

Here, Sedgwick invokes the first-person plural "us," positioning herself as an active participant in queer and fat scholarship and daily life. This perspective nods to another key issue in fat studies that extends outward from (and incorporates) problems posed by language in relation to fat: politics of identity.

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[2] The timeline of fat activism recognised in fat studies is typically that of Western efforts, and most notably of American activism. Charlotte Cooper discusses this issue at length in her book, "Fat Activism" (2016). The Western-centricity of the discipline is produced by a confluence of factors, from the more explicit nature of the Obesity Epidemic in Western states to the overarching issue of white/Western supremacy. See also: Cooper (2009).

[3] While these descriptors can still represent or imply social hierarchies (tall people have advantages over short people, blonde people are more likely to be white and thus, to benefit from white supremacy), none of these descriptors are considered pejorative to the same degree as fat (Saguy 2013).

Biopower and Identity Politics

While many - if not most - fat studies scholars are fat (or formerly fat) people, there is debate over who can and should contribute to fat epistemology, ontology, and taxonomy and how these scholars should (or should not) interact with other politics of identity. This is because as the hegemonic process of biopower occurs with or without our explicit consent, it can be difficult to parse long-held cultural biases from intersectional lived realities, and to delineate the experiences of individuals from those of groups (Collins 1997). Interventions into fat history (Farrell 2011; Stearns 1997; Vigarello 2013), for example, have tended to read contemporary anti-fat bias as the consequence of puritanical and Evangelical policy-making but have not comprehensively outlined the role of racial prejudice and eugenics in creating the very idea of "fat." However, as Black sociologist Sabrina Strings (2019: 6) argues influentially in her monograph "Fearing the Black Body," the legacy of fat bodies as national failures is intertwined with American and European racial politics and colonial anxieties that coalesce in the "context of slavery, religious revivals, and the massive immigration of persons deemed 'part-Africanoid.'" She deconstructs fatphobia and thin fetishism through a biopolitical frame (also relying on Foucault's definition) by showing "how racial discourse was deployed by elite Europeans and white Americans to create social distinctions between themselves and so-called greedy and fat racial Others" (7).

Strings evidences how the shaping and constructing of the fat body is not ancillary to the enormous project of constructing the racialised body; rather, it exists as a direct result of "racecraft," or the work of collective and individualised "human action and imagination" that produces and maintains the folklore of "race" (Fields & Fields 2012: 9). She demonstrates how fatness is shaped at the level of biopower, thus affecting fat people – particularly women – across racial divides (2019):

> The image of the fat black woman as "savage" and "barbarous" in art, philosophy, and science, and as "diseased" in medicine has been used to *both degrade black women and discipline white women* (11).

Strings' work marks a paradigm shift in studies of fatness. Her study has altered the course of fat studies not only by producing a comprehensive history of fatness that accounts for

Black lived experiences alongside hegemonic shifts in racist politics and attitudes, but also by proving how integral an embodied intersectional approach is to nuanced analysis. By applying the frame of biopower - recognising the implicit and explicit "bios" that accompany it - and situating the scholarship in a clear and critical feminist standpoint, fat becomes more than an excessive quality embodied by an individual or an identity to be claimed; rather, fat becomes a productive site of analysis and an intersectional lens, where intersectionality is defined as "the notion that subjectivity is constituted by mutually reinforcing vectors of race, gender, class, and sexuality" (Crenshaw 1989; Nash 2008: 2). Strings' work also evidences the analytical strength of going beyond, as Jennifer Nash rightfully criticises, the tendency of feminist critique to end after "simply identifying particular intersections as under-theorised or unacknowledged" (Nash 2008: 11). Her application of fat to a history in consideration of biopower further illuminates the axes of oppression so carefully articulated in rigorous debates of disciplines such as critical race, disability, and gender studies. For Strings, as for contemporary fat studies scholars, fat has too often been poorly defined by the boundaries of racist, heteronormative, ableist inquiry precisely because of the difficulty inherent to deconstructing "invisible" structures of biopower (Pausé & Taylor 2021). It is not that these earlier histories were entirely erroneous, she argues, but rather that they formed an incomplete account of fat, due in part to their authors' - two white men and a thin white woman - standpoints.

Debate around identity politics and the power of embodied analysis is divisive. Prominent fat studies scholars Charlotte Cooper (2016) and Cat Pausé (2014; 2020), for example, have both argued that knowledge about fatness *must be* produced by fat individuals. In feminist standpoint theory, knowledge claims occur as "part of practical and perceptual interaction with one another in shared surroundings" (Rouse 2009: 202). In "Black Feminist Thought," Patricia Hill Collins says that "each group speaks from its own standpoint and shares its own partial, situated knowledge. But because each group perceives its own truth as partial, its knowledge is unfinished" (1991: 236-37). Still, she adds, "dialogue is critical to the success of this epistemological approach. Nevertheless—resisting power inequities must be addressed." Some standpoint feminists, such as Zillah Eisenstein (1981), have suggested using the specific positioning of women of colour and their multiple

oppression as an analytic starting point. This chimes with Pausé and Taylor's (2021) recent claim:

> We believe that non-fat people engaging in Fat Studies scholarship are a threat to Fat Studies… when those who hold socially dominant identities study groups that have been marginalised, they reify the positional power of their identity. (…) We would argue that no matter the good intent, non-fat scholars engaging in Fat Studies scholarship cannot help but reinforce the structural and systemic dynamics of fatphobia and anti-fat bias (11-12).

As Nira Yuval-Davis notes, however, Eisenstein's position was never intended to intimate that "only those who share a certain marginal or oppressed positioning would be able to really understand it (and therefore only women should study women, only Blacks should study Blacks, etc.) or even enjoy thereby a privileged access to understanding society as a whole" (2012: 48). Further, Yuval-Davis argues, this position has been rejected by a number of standpoint scholars for progressing an "oppression olympics" (Hancock 2011) - in which contested constructions of oppression compete with one another. Still, the "claim by women that women's lives provide a better starting point for thought about gender systems" Sandra Harding says, "is not the same as the claim that their own lives are the best such starting point" (1993: 58).

Fat studies scholars - both non-fat and fat - grapple with these tensions in productive ways. Nash and Warin (2017) in particular are sceptical of the ways in which heavily-enforced identity politics of fat make space for intersectional perspectives. They challenge potentially essentialist trends within fat studies and activism, discussing how common debates around intersectionality and essentialist identity politics may have long-term implications for those theorising size as an axis of oppression. There is a danger, they argue, in fat activists and scholars using body size (e.g. what people look like – a question of sight and visibility) "as their main platform and also as a measure of who can and cannot speak about fatness." An intersectional position "asks us to look at both 'marked' and 'unmarked' positions critically – therefore the binary of fat/thin needs to be deconstructed" (Nash & Warin 2017: 77). Further, as Judith Butler notes in the Forward to "Gender Trouble," "no single account of construction will do … these categories always work as background for

one another, and they often find their most powerful articulation through one another" (1999: Xvi).

In other words, the various applications of fat as a lens, when intermeshed with any number of methods and lenses, produce compelling (and competing) discourses, building on one another in a concerted aim to deconstruct existing structures of biopower and speak to the richness in variance of lived experience. I do not subscribe, in this thesis, to the idea that fat bodies need be the only voices in fat studies scholarship, nor that women are the only voices allowed to speak in feminist media scholarship. As with any scholar, my account of fatness as part of a structure of biopower is necessarily bound by my own ability to speak to and recognise the intersections and intertwinings of fat bodies; in efforts to build upon and amplify certain examples or pieces of scholarship, this thesis presents not a "universalistic" political voice intended to speak on behalf of all fat women (Balibar 1990), but rather one of many efforts in fat and feminist media studies to extricate meanings from visual representation. Drawing on the varied and dynamic work across these fields, the articulation of identity in this work relies on (rather than hides its relation to) ambiguity, ambivalence, and the tangled knots of personhood and citizenship produced by neoliberal biopower.

Biopedagogies and Feminist Media Studies

The ideas presented by eugenics-informed sciences that I mentioned earlier are, while outmoded in critical observation, continually being remade to suit the language and expectations of the neoliberal moment (Rutherford 2021). This hegemonic remaking of exclusionary politics is often seen as occurring through "biopedagogies," or instructions on "how to live" that are made both explicitly (in public health campaigns, school curricula, and "lesson of the week" TV) and implicitly (in advertisements, social media posts, and popular TV comedies) (Raisborough 2016; Wright & Harwood 2009).[4] Disseminated in the context of daily lifestyle entertainment, moral standards become attached to certain bodies and disallowed for others, coming to (in varying degrees) both influence and reflect shared

[4] This recalls (but does not here demand an account of) the wealth of cultural studies scholarship on public pedagogy in regard to the "obesity crisis" specifically, see Emma Rich (2011). For a historical overview of public media pedagogy, we can look to Raymond Williams (1974).

cultural attitudes. In regard to fatness, for example, Rail et al. note the "awesome political power" of the obesity epidemic both to "spawn a host of cultural industries in support of itself" and to generate and disseminate "ideal modes of being in relation to health risks" (2010: 261; Raisborough 2016). This is evident in the overabundance of weight-based reality television shows that rely on spectacle and shame, but can also be less blatant, embedded in the proliferation of mundane narratives or images of "appropriate" families who are thin, white, and heterosexual.

Television has, since its inception, carried with it both a utopian promise to "bring another world into the home" and a dystopian anxiety about TV's disruption of the family home, both rooted in its potential as a pedagogical tool (Spigel 1988). Ouelette and Hay (2008) demonstrate the evaporation of the pedagogy of early TV - in which television functioned as part of a public offering primarily centred on state responsibility - through increasing privitisation (neoliberalisation) and diffusion of programming related to various network "brands"; they argue (57-58):

> Only in the current stage of liberalism, with its specific requirements of entrepreneurialism and self-responsibilization [sic], do the techniques of everyday self-management become so central to television's governing role.

Deborah Lupton (1999), identifying this same trend at the start of the twenty-first century, notes that there are very real consequences to the shifting of public resources to a private, domestic entertainment enterprise; not only has mass media come to constitute an acceptable source of information about health and medicine, she argues, but it is now one of the *most* widely accepted sources for medical information.

As biopedagogies are the result of an accumulation of raced, gendered, and classed policies and attitudes that have been absorbed over time, many of the ideas filter through culture in intricate and invisible ways. Pedagogy, in this sense, is "not simply about the social construction of knowledge, values and experiences; it is also a performative practice embodied in the lived interactions among education, audience, texts and institutional formations … across a spectrum of social practice and settings" (Giroux 2004: 61). In other words, as Ellsworth writes, pedagogy is a social relationship "[that] is very close in. It gets

right in there in your brain, your body, your heart, your sense of self, of the world, of others, and of possibilities and impossibilities in all those realms" (1997: 6). In this vein, a number of studies on reality and lifestyle TV have sought out the role of media in the construction of fat in relation to other pedagogical engagements such as the social formation of the working class (Biressi & Nunn 2008; Wood & Skeggs 2008; Wright & Harwood 2009) or of constructed dichotomies between groups (LeBesco 2011; Saguy & Gruys 2010). Ouellette and Hay (2008) fit Foucault's (1995) theory of punishment to their thinking about reality TV and the biopedagogical restraints enforced in makeover and weight-loss, organisation and cleaning, and parenting programmes. They argue that audiences are taught to "develop and maximise their capacities for normalcy, happiness, material stability, and success" rather than rely on the public "safety net" of welfare (2008: 476). Other scholars have thought about this in relation to the self-discipline encouraged by makeover shows (Weber 2009; Sender 2012) and the diet and exercise regimens taught in many weight-loss programmes (Sukhan 2013).

Wood and Skeggs (2008) argue that the navigation of class, race, gender, and weight presented by reality TV is "emblematic of conditions of ontological insecurity in which our sense of identity and belonging are thrown into question, forcing the individual to constantly reorient themselves in relation to the personal risk relations with which they are faced." The importance in reorienting oneself against this risk is, according to Emma Rich (2011: 7; see also Rich & Evans 2005):

> a strong feature of the obesity discourse in which bodily difference (weight, size and shape) is reduced to a moral issue of personal responsibility to protect oneself from the 'obesity epidemic'. The 'rational ascetic' underpinning this discourse acts to 'discipline the body, to ensure that the body will behave (or move) in methodical and regular ways' (Murphy 1995: 109 qtd. in Rich 2011: 7).

This is of concern in feminist media studies in particular, as it is a field of study in which the effects of televised representation on (and through) audiences have been called into question.

Much of the writing on fatness in media - particularly in reality television - centres on the idea that audiences accept problematic, regressive, and cruel treatment of fat

individuals uncritically or to unseen damage (Bourn et al. 2015; Klos et al. 2015); Wright and Wright, for example, argue that "television is a powerful educator," but that "most viewers never consider the cumulative effect of its pedagogy" (2015: 14). Rich emphasises the potential for damaging messages to cause damage and for empowering messages to produce "counterhegemonic learning" in viewers (2016).

However, as Ouelette and Hay (2008) have remarked, studies of television through public pedagogy can err on the side of viewing neoliberalism as a straightforward and persuasive actor without considering audiences' criticality. While reality TV that relies on shaming fat participants certainly contributes to and evidences negative dialogues about fatness, the assumption that the viewer has no capacity for critical reasoning is flawed (Gorton 2009; Grindstaff & Murray 2015; Skeggs & Wood 2012). Rather, feminist media researcher Jayne Raisborough (2016: 96) argues, the messages embedded in reality television are shaped by the "loyalties, anxieties, histories, and futures that socially situated viewers heap into their viewing" and although pedagogical forms of TV may "secure ideological consent" from viewers, the *degree* of acquiescence and consent is necessarily ambiguous (Klos et al. 2015; Rail et al. 2010; Skeggs & Wood 2012).

This difficult division - between the obvious pedagogical influence of television at odds with the intricacies of lived experience - is well-represented in debates between second wave and later feminist critiques of media. In the introduction to the second edition of her 1982 monograph "Loving with a Vengeance," second wave feminist critic Tania Modleski (2007) responds to criticisms that her constructed viewers - housewives watching soap operas - were drawn out in her analysis as the norm, and thus were classed, raced, and gendered without acknowledgement. In mounting her self-defence, Modleski points to a divide between media scholars on the manners by which audiences are created in and through various media criticisms. This divide is one that remains problematic today. Katharine Sender (2012: 12), for example, criticises work that relies on "the model of the obliging viewer," in which audiences are assumed to be hypnotically compelled by media to enact good biocitizenship as a direct result of engagement with TV. In her comprehensive audience research, Sender found that while audiences members *did* respond to a biopedagogical call for transformation and sometimes implemented advice from makeover and weight-loss shows, these same audiences also showed acute critical awareness of the

shows' intentions. Sender's audiences "did not merely parrot the norms of the shows," but rather "negotiated with - even expressly refused - some of the texts' explicit themes" (13).

From Modleski's outlook, though, the poetics of soap opera produce a series of psychoanalytic insights that map neatly onto gendered experiences of romance and love. She defends her earlier work, arguing that in finding that "the third-person limited point of view in romances works to minimize the contradictions women suffer in relation to the expression of sexual desire" and that "the multiple plots and open-endedness of soap operas serve to position *the spectator* as good mother" her work accurately reflects the experience of American womanhood in alignment with the soap opera (2007: xvi, *emphasis mine*). In making this claim, Modleski explicitly distances her thinking from the later efforts of British TV scholars Charlotte Brunsdon (1993), Janice Radway (1991), and Angela McRobbie (2004), who each employ differing feminist approaches to media analysis. By opposing second wave theory, Modleski argues, these later studies misunderstand the power of investigating "women's texts" affectively in favour of adherence to a newer set of feminisms.

This thesis, however, heeds Brunsdon's (1993) caution about a tendency in feminist analysis to universalising a gendered experience of media and lived experience.[5] Instead this work recognises, as Raisborough (2016: 93) argues, that "rather than regard [neoliberal] biopedagogy as overt, consistent messaging with predictable results" biopedagogy should be understood as "a site of flux, contradictions, and tensions" (see also: He & Wu 2009). This approach is reflected in the work of feminist media scholars like Alexia Smit (2010) who, despite Modleski's worries for the future of feminist scholarship, manages to investigate "women's media" without essentialising gender. Writing about makeover and plastic surgery programmes, Smit notes the tendency in feminist media studies to simultaneously victimise and villainise viewership (which is often, but not always, viewership by women). She employs Carol-Anne Tyler's exploration of subjectivity to explore this paradoxical relationship; Tyler, Smit notes, writes of spectators as experiencing "terrible enjoyment" from seeing bodies cut to "bloody bits," at the same time as they

[5] Brunsdon problematises the notion of a simple, feminist "we" and notes that scholars working through embodied analysis should position themselves clearly without making gendered assumptions.

experience a forceful detachment from the self inspired by such a "violent gaze" (Tyler 2006, ctd. in Smit 2010). In response, Smit (2013) later argues that "[w]hile these shows can be seen as anti-feminist and regressive in their explicit messages" scholarly readings of them can - and must - "challenge the idea that our pleasure in watching them is driven entirely by misogyny, cruelty, and a desire for visual mastery over the body" despite "the format's intense interest in pain, exposure, and the display of the body."

Rather than attempting to find the tidy subject positions offered up by the television text - the propensity for which Brunsdon criticises Modleski - this thesis recognises biopedagogies not as fixed realities but as complicated and messy "assemblage(s)-in-the-making" (Raisborough 2016: 93). The trend in seeking nuance and messiness, though it has yet to be applied rigorously to studies of televised fatness specifically, has been heralded by a number of scholars in TV and critical feminist media studies, particularly those studying the vast and varied genre of reality TV. For example, Ouelette and Hay, whose influential directive that scholars see "television as a cultural technology that both enables and directs the government of the self" suggest a growing trend in analysis requiring researchers to "think outside analytical binaries" (2008: 43). As Hester Baer (2016: 20) posits, analyses of TV succeed when they work through and beyond the murky territory of the body as an indicator of personal achievement. Amy West (2011: 63) argues further that TV is particularly open to messiness in analysis because of its "long history of devaluation as trash, filth, or waste." In West's view, television "challenges the border zones between public and private, ordinary and extraordinary, familiar and unfamiliar" precisely because of its tenuous and transitional nature as a tool for both education and entertainment.

Binding Fatness and Feminist Media Studies: Postfeminism, embodied analysis, and existing critique

The medium of television has long been dismissed as a subject of serious study within the academy, where auteur cinema is privileged as high art over the low art of TV. In recent years, scholarship on television has even termed certain TV shows as "new cinema," identifying "prestige" shows which these scholars believe have finally succeeded in elevating the quality of the otherwise mass-appeal (read: *low*) substances that make up the

bulk of television offerings: daytime talk shows, reality TV, soap opera, primetime serial, and the mid-budget sitcom (Geraghty & Weissman 2016: 365; Johnson 2007). In the service of heralding a "third golden age of television," (Martin 2013), scholars like Neil Landau (2016) with his industry "gamechangers" and Jason Mittell (2011; 2015; see also: Dunleavy 2018) with the polarizing concept of "narrative complexity" have a tendency to distance contemporary TV from more traditionally women-oriented genres; Mittell, for example, explicitly refutes the notion that "contemporary prime-time narrative complexity… has much in common with or influences from soap operas" (2011: 134). This distancing, Buonanno (2019) argues, represents a lost opportunity to understand TV in a new age, instead "helping to spread the perception and belief that television works are, at last, aligned to the aesthetics and reputation of the culturally legitimate artworks of literature and cinema" (Buonanno 2019). In lauding some TV as high art and other TV as low culture, these criticisms demonstrate a blindness to the progress of feminist media scholarship, where scholars have long claimed lower forms not so much as a way of proving them feminist (although this debate exists, too - see Boyle 2008, Modleski 1986) but rather to uncover the transgressive elements in that which is popular and, often, that which is feminised.

These tensions are not new; early feminist TV scholarship focused on the soap opera precisely because it was highly popular and widely-consumed and yet, it was deeply under-explored as a result of its ties to femininity and women's programming (Imre 2009). Part of a sweep of second wave media criticism which acted intentionally to divorce itself from male-centric cinema research, studies of soap opera were well-positioned to speak back to the markers of quality and worth typically assigned to films or literature. Soap operas were dismissed by the academy, these feminist scholars (Ang 1991; Brunsdon 1997; Modleski 2007 [1982]) posited, precisely because they were marketed to - and primarily consumed by - women; further, soap operas featured excessively emotional, wide-ranging storylines rather than, for example, the stoic male heroes of auteur cinema. Thus feminist scholars and critics at the time were forced to continually justify and revalue women-oriented TV programmes as legitimate and deserving of attention, before arriving at deeper analysis of the texts themselves (Geraghty 1991; Modleski 2007 [1982]).

Among the many women working in this field before the turn of the 21st century, American scholars Ien Ang (1991, 1996; Ang & Couling 1996), Jane Feuer (1992), and

Tania Modleski (1982, 1984, 1991) and British academics Charlotte Brunsdon (1993, 1997), Christine Geraghty (1991), and Dorothy Hobson (1982) were particularly influential in their attention to the medium specificity of television, or the formal and narrative structures - the "poetics" - of the medium that influence and affect analyses of the text (Boyle 2008: 184; Geraghty 2016; see: Brunsdon & Spigel 1997 and Harvey 2020). In classifying and deconstructing genre, studies ranged from differentiating the melodrama of soaps from that of cinema (Feuer 1984; Modleski 1982; Mulvey & Halliday 1972) to better understanding narrative conventions and forms inherent to the soap opera and primetime serial (Brunsdon 1997, 2000; Geraghty 1991; Nowell-Smith 1977). Despite their regular battles against collective ignorance toward women's media as well as to women's broader experiences and pleasures - as in the prestige-centric studies which consider television as only recently presenting "quality" narratives - feminist media criticism has had a powerful, political effect on television studies more broadly (Akass & McCabe 2006). This work is subversive in its serious attention to women's pleasures and preferences, forming a discourse that has continued relevance (Geraghty 2016). Despite the continued effect of subversive work, however, the canon of feminist scholarship on the subject of women does have its limitations that align with the difficulties presented between second-wave feminism and postfeminism (which I discuss in greater length in my second chapter.)

The definition of postfeminism is fraught with ambiguity, but the concept has largely been understood to stand for one of three responses to second wave feminism: epistemological, historical, and/or antithetical (Gill 2007: 254). An epistemological shift from the second wave suggests an expansion of feminist thought that is influenced by theories of post-structuralism, postmodernism, and postcolonialism (Gill 2007: 249). The historical break suggests an erroneous unity in thinking among second wave theorists (something specific to break *from)* as well as an imagined time "after feminism" (as if the ideas of feminism have now been "overcome") (Boyle 2008). Finally, an antithetical critique denotes a position that feminism is no longer required (Horbury 2015). Understanding the act of "post-ing" feminism in this way, Tasker and Negra (2005: 108) famously ask: "how do we address and make sense of a postfeminist media culture that repeatedly and loudly insists that feminism is no longer relevant?"

It can be challenging to trace the transition from the second wave of feminism to its supposed successor, postfeminism, but it has become a key expression in feminists' critical vocabulary despite its ambiguity (Gill 2016). The term itself continues to spark debate among feminist critics and scholars for its recognition (even affirmation) of sexual difference, its lack of clear remit or semantic definition, its political inactivity, and its perpetuation of a neoliberal vision of choice and consumerism. Thus, the position of postfeminism as a distinct movement or continuance or successor to second wave feminism is tenuous at best. Indeed, the term has been around for many years. As Karen Boyle explains, "postfeminist" was a term first employed in the 1920s to denigrate feminist efforts by claiming them to be complete; these claims became popular "at the very point that feminist gains began to reshape the public sphere" (2008: 178). The legacy of postfeminism, then, is interlinked with patriarchal hierarchies and neoliberal visions of self-governance. Scholars have further demonstrated that the term found its place in the lexicon of popular discourse and public interest in the 1980s, speaking to a social and academic view that "increasingly defines what it means to be a feminist by factors of lifestyle and attitude rather than politics and activism" (Dow 1996). As a result of such subjective and fluid interpretations, critics across a wide variety of contexts have found it difficult to pin down postfeminism and, importantly, to differentiate it from other feminisms. By the early 1990s, however, feminist scholars recognised the increase in postfeminist narratives and discourses as a grim reality: "women reject feminism because of a backlash against it - a highly effective, often insidious campaign to discredit its goals, distort its message and make women question whether they really want equality after all" (Gibbs 1992: 51).

Rosalind Gill (2007) and Angela McRobbie (2004), however, argue that in order to understand the role of postfeminism in contemporary media beyond this problematic focus on feminism's "end," we might see it expressed less as a political movement or practice and more as a "sensibility" expressed within contemporary media. This sensibility, Rowe Karlyn (2011) suggests, is characterised by the rise of neoliberalism in contemporary society since the 1990s and thus is rooted in extant generational tensions, particularly between postfeminism and second wave feminism (which she characterises as the divide between a generation of daughters versus a generation of mothers). The postfeminist sensibility can be understood as a perspective on womanhood that begs little interest in a politically active

lashing out against sociopolitical restraints, relying instead a paradigm based on personal choice and freedom. This sensibility is, at times, employed by women in popular media as a way of gaining social and sexual recognition; rather than being defined as feminist, these women are made more socially and economically successful by avoiding dialogues of liberation or activism (Rowe Karlyn 2011). The various articulations of the postfeminist sensibility, then, appear to "(re)claim an identity uncomplicated by gender politics, postmodernism, or institutional critique" by constructing identities through the (politically inactive) neoliberal frame of choice (Lagerway 2017; see also: Spigel 2013). Any limitations to professional and personal success are located within individual women: "women can 'have it all' if they only dare to adopt a go-getter attitude and assert themselves" (Alexandersson & Kalonaityte 2020: 417).

Some of the TV shows which have been heavily analysed for upholding a postfeminist sensibility include popular early-00s series such as *Friends* (NBC 1994 - 2004), *Desperate Housewives* (ABC 2004 - 2012), and *Ally McBeal* (Fox 1997 - 2002). These programmes are characterised by their rapt attention to women's choices, their judgements of moral values (ie., whether women are "good" or "bad" role models, beautiful or ugly), and their running commentary on the gendered potential of women who seek entrepreneurial success by eschewing political activism (Ahl et al. 2016; Byrne et al. 2019; Gill 2017; Lewis 2014, 2017; Sullivan & Delaney 2017). In engaging with the rhetoric of the postfeminist sensibility, these texts appear to connect only with the experiences of white, middle-class, young women. In this manner they provide "no distinctions among the various social and cultural positions and experiences of women", and therefore, "celebrate[s] depictions of white, middle-class, heterosexual women's success as markers of all women's supposed success" (Projansky 2001: 73).[6] This appears to be a reason to avoid postfeminist critique, as it caters only to one identity group; Gill argues, however, that despite these assertions, postfeminism is "increasingly theorized in intersectional terms" and that the study of a postfeminist sensibility "seems to be growing, rather than diminishing, in importance as part of a critical lexicon for understanding contemporary culture, with a number of writers noting

[6] This is an issue of white supremacy as much as it is of wealth disparity; as Tasker and Negra argue, "postfeminist fictions frequently set aside both evident economic disparities and the fact that the majority of women approach paid labour as an economic necessity rather than a choice" (Tasker & Negra 2007: 2).

its resilience and adaptability" (2016; Dejmanee 2016; Negra 2014). Gill (2016: 616) further notes that in an age of "popular feminism" (within a news cycle oversaturated with supposedly feminist debates), many feminist media storms "arrive always already-trivialised;" thus, she argues, it is crucial to understand the "kinds of visibility" offered by contemporary iterations of feminism in media, which have not departed entirely from the postfeminist sensibility articulated in the 1990s and 2000s. Indeed, Gill questions whether this cultural moment might better be described as "post-postfeminist," where the discourses of postfeminism no longer hold sway over emerging forms of feminism; however, she concludes, the issues and tensions of the contemporary media environment "underline the value of examining the circulation of postfeminist logic" (Harvey 2020).

Postfeminism Now: Popular Feminisms and Twenty-First Century Scholarship

Recent media scholarship has continued to interrogate postfeminism (and post-postfeminism), in many cases placing a more specific emphasis on the interactions of postfeminism with popular feminism. In "Emergent Feminisms," Keller, Ryan and the contributors highlight how the prevailing media postfeminist sensibility (as put forth by McRobbie and Gill) has been complicated by its recent turn toward popular feminism, which Sarah Banet-Weiser (2019) argues has "allowed us to imagine a culture where feminism, in every form, doesn't have to be defended; it is accessible, it is even admired."

Given this re-emergence of feminist politics, the predominant picture of television as fundamentally postfeminist has been disrupted. As a result, "Emergent Feminisms" responds to (and updates) Tasker and Negra's (2007) question of what to do with the relevance of feminism, asking: "why has feminism returned to the forefront of popular media now, and what forms is feminism taking?" (Keller & Ryan 2018: 6). In answering this question, they argue that postfeminism, rather than disappearing from discourse, has become a "media phenomenon" that is updated and "systematically reworded" to accommodate the most popular feminist notions of the moment (Keller & Ryan 2018: 4; Gill 2007). Here, postfeminism continues to act not so much "as a temporal concept or a form of feminism" but rather, as a neoliberal sensibility that privileges the individual, apolitical empowerment of women and girls; the postfeminist sensibility and its interaction with popular feminism,

then, supports a critical framework of biopower and biocitizenship as it continues to privilege and uphold images of women "as productive, feminized workers, citizens, and mothers" and to denigrate and judge women who fall short of these categories (Keller & Ryan 2018: 4).

To situate these concerns, we can look to the new feminist branding process visible in celebrity media, typified for Bryce Renniger (2018) in a 2014 *Time Magazine* poll in which "feminist" was listed amongst words that would potentially be "banned" in the following year (ostensibly due to the large numbers of celebrity women choosing to identify with the term). Renniger argues that celebrity feminism has "emerged as a response to postfeminism, suggesting that feminism deserves a place within contemporary cultural discourse." (Renniger, 2018: 43) Despite feminism entering celebrity discourse, and even being deployed as a public relations tool, Renniger stresses that although "renewed attention to feminism does sometimes change the course of popular cultural commentary to associate feminism with a positive valence" it simultaneously "encourages a simplistic understanding of what feminism is and can be" (43). Further, this feminist identification appears to be a wholly personal or lifestyle-based descriptor, as opposed to a display of politics or desire for collective political action.[7] Its recent iterations, too, are inextricable from bureaucratic structures and the framework of global capitalism made personal in the sphere of social media.

Ultimately then, identifying as a feminist in the 21st century quite often means conforming to the ethos of self-empowerment and self-confidence that permeates capitalist projects, actively discouraging the "creation of feminist alternative through counterpublic regrouping and political agitation" (Renniger 2018: 52). These same forces are at play not just in broader readings of contemporary media, but also in the tensions posed between the more strictly political areas of fat activism and popular, visual activisms like the body positivity movement, which are closely defined through the popular and postfeminist sensibilities of choice and self-love. Shani Orgad and Rosalind Gill point to this in their recent work on what they call "confidence cult(ure)," or the cultural paradox by which, as gender, racial and class inequalities deepen, women are called upon further to *believe in*

[7] See Turner 2010 on "analytics-driven journalism" and celebrity culture.

themselves" (2022: 1). They argue of their interrogations into the "self-evident value" of confidence and self-esteem rhetoric appearing across many "apparently unrelated spheres of life":

> We expected [in the 2010s] that this might be a short-term trend; that confidence might just be "having a moment." But several years later, our culture's obsession with confidence — particularly women's self-confidence— shows no sign of diminishing. Indeed, it seems to be ramping up, partly as a result of the new visibility of popular feminism (…) These exhortations have become ubiquitous across so many different domains of social and cultural life, and with such striking homogeneity, that they have come to constitute a kind of unquestioned common sense (2022: 2-3).

The proposition in popular culture and commerce alike has become, in other words, that the cure for social and economic inequalities can be found not only in the individual pursuit of health and wellness (as has long been the case), but also in the rigorous attempts to increase one's own self-confidence. In this way, Orgad and Gill argue, the confidence cult(ure) "opens up the promise of a more intersectional address that is attentive to power and difference, only to close this down, returning us to a 'one-size-fits-all' model" (2021: 7).

Fat in Feminist Media Studies

As Gill argues, postfeminist issues are about "nothing less than the transformations in feminisms and transformations in media culture -- and their mutual relationship" (2007b: 148). In this manner, postfeminism increasingly presents a useful foundation for consideration of fat bodies onscreen, particularly in the age of the "body positivity" discourse that makes up confidence culture. This has been the case in reference to representation of thin bodies for years in feminist media studies, where anorexia, thinness, and self-image have long been a focus of critique. In Susan Bordo's prominent "Unbearable Weight" (1993), for example, she analyses the postfeminist "body politic" by evidencing how images of thinness in popular culture lead to disordered eating and self-hatred. However, while Bordo acknowledges how power has become equated with thinness, she

rests on the notion that women's bodies have all become "alienated products, texts of our own creative making, from which we maintain a strange and ironic detachment" (288). Responding to this trend in media studies, prominent and prolific fat activist Charlotte Cooper cites activist Kate Moran, who asks: "Why are they thinking about this all the time through the experience of the thin woman? Why is fat never mentioned, or people who are more or less permanently fat?" (2016: 104). Cooper argues that the predominant focus on thin bodies stems from many researchers' thin privilege which allows them to speak for and in place of fat women.[8]

Further, when studies *have* centred on fat bodies on television specifically, most of these explorations, understandably, consider the ways in which TV depicts large bodies through the lenses of "freakishness" and abjection (Eli & Lavis 2014; Giraldo 2015; Owen 2015; Ringrose & Walkerdine 2008). These primarily view the "abject" through Julia Kristeva (1982) - and Judith Butler's (1990) - articulation of the horror reaction caused by a breakdown in the (otherwise safe, well-preserved, clean) distinction between self and other (Grosz 1994; Lebesco 2003). Fat, as that which becomes uncanny, acts in these analyses as the site upon which we can understand, for example, the large woman who "fails as subject/object of desire and consumption, and lacks requisite qualities of self-reflexivity necessary for [neoliberal] reinvention" (Ringrose & Walkerdine 2008: 228). This line of thinking has continued relevance as we continue to witness an overabundance of weight-loss programming that relies - as Karsay and Schmuck (2018) have argued compellingly of brutal weight-loss competition shows - on highly problematic, regressive, and cruel depictions of fat bodies, with measurably negative effects on viewers and participants alike (Ouelette and Hay 2008; Sender 2012). As Kent argues, abjection is particularly useful in unpicking reactions of revulsion and fear because fat bodies are associated with "death" and thus take on "the burden of representing the horror of the body itself" as they bring mortality to the fore (2001: 135).

Alongside - and within - studies of abjection and disgust, fat has been theorised further as "grotesque" and "spectacular," with a particular relevance in "unruly woman" discourse. In defining this category of representation, Kathleen Rowe Karlyn discusses "pig

[8] Jayne Raisborough writes of this effect in her work on fat bodies in media (2016: 28).

ladies, big ladies, and ladies with big mouths," or the carnivalesque figures who open avenues to "rethinking how women are constructed as gendered subjects in the language of spectacle and the visual" (1995: 11). The unruly woman is the "woman on top" who dominates men and freely feeds her desire and hunger for sex, food, and laughter. She provokes male desire without being demure and incites comedy without being an accidental butt of the joke. Fatness, as Rowe Karlyn describes in reference to Miss Piggy and Roseanne (Roseanne Barr), is one of many "signifiers of female unruliness" (31). As such, unruliness has provided a solid foundation for thinking about fat women on TV, perhaps most notably in Anne Helen Petersen's (2017) analysis of counterculture stars such as Melissa McCarthy, Amy Schumer, and Lena Dunham.

My study does not depart entirely from these articulations as I periodically rely on considerations of abjection and of unruliness when they are relevant to the given analysis. However, this thesis does depart from the notion that there are only a handful of ways to *be* (and to see) fat. As with queer studies and the interrogation of who, exactly, we mean when we say "queer," and with feminist inquiry and trouble over who constitutes "women," attempts to pin down definitions of fatness in media appear to have settled into a tidy calibration between two poles. Fat women are positioned as *either* abject, carnivalesque spectacles, descended from the Venus Hottentot and the freak show *or* empowered, rebellious feminists, rejecting and illuminating troubling gendered norms. In my research, however, I have uncovered a wealth of contradictions that unearth potential for deeper inquiry. Moving away from considering fatness as a single and straightforward actor, I argue, unlocks a series of questions about not just the "power" of fat to illuminate "the horizons and boundaries" of a thin norm but also about the critical pathways of thought to which feminist media criticism tends to adhere (Harjunen 2017).

Chapter 1 Resubstantiating the "Thin Woman Within"

Introduction

Rae slowly steps onto her bathroom scale. The number on the little plastic panel spins higher and higher, finally landing at the mark of 16 stone. “I am fat,” Rae tells us in voiceover, peering into the bathroom mirror. The girl in the mirror looks back at her and the camera moves in closer until, for a moment, only Rae’s eyes are visible. She blinks, then reaches her hands back to her neck, where a zipper protrudes from under her hair. Rae fishes for the zip among the folds and curves of skin, and begins to pull it down, her face becoming euphoric. Tugging and peeling with great effort, she pulls away the rest of her body, which falls to the ground in a heap; a rubbery, fleshy skin suit pools at her feet. The sun streams in through the window, glorious, as Rae analyses “her” new thin body and the soft black lingerie that accompanies it. A necessity of camera magic, her face remains obscured, but her body oozes pleasure. Fair, delicate hands trace over the flat expanse of a new stomach; she inspects the curve of her bum and the bounce of small, perky breasts in the soft sunlight.

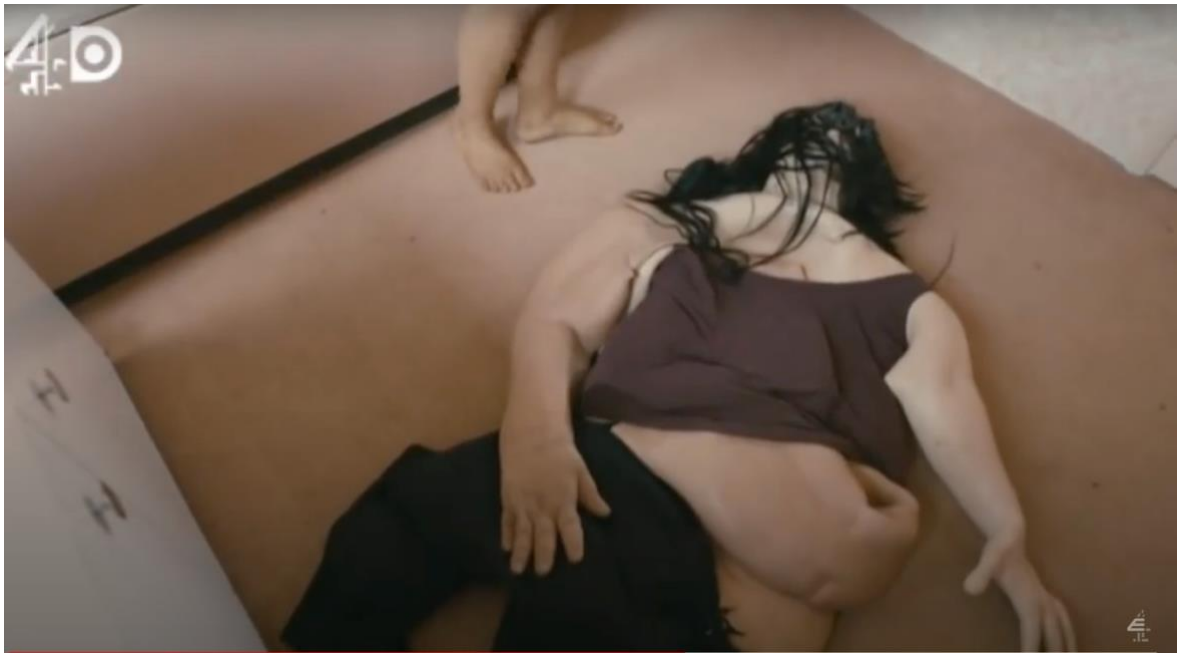

Figure 1-1 Rae's fat suit falls to the bathroom floor

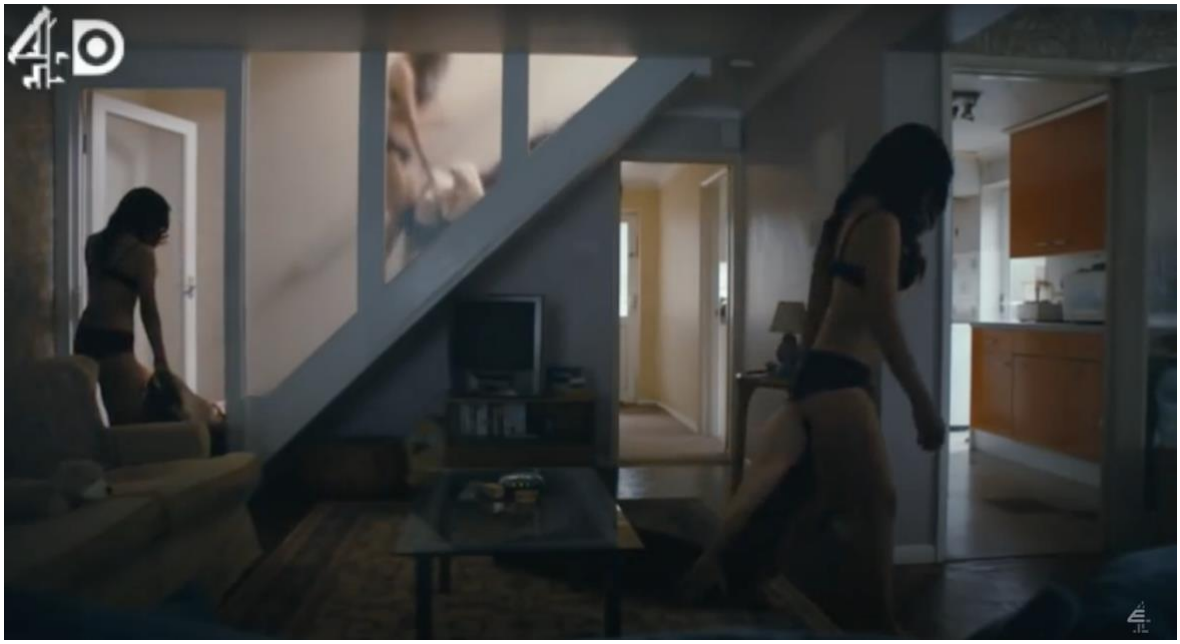

Figure 1-2 Rae drags the fat suit downstairs

Free of her corporeal burden, Rae proceeds to drag the fat suit down the stairs of her semi-detached home, lugging its heavy weight to the back garden, where she unceremoniously stuffs the beige mass into a bin. The weird, pasty rubber hands and head flail, an arm flops over the side, bouncing off the bin's metal sides. As it becomes even brighter outside, the music swells and the colours in the garden grow uncomfortably rich and vibrant: bright green grass, deep red wall, electric blue sky. Against the fantastical setting, Rae performs one last task. She lights a match and neatly tosses it into the bin, burning, melting, and ultimately destroying her fat body. The flames fly and Rae revels in the experience until she's brought back to reality; a droplet of melting, sizzling fat is transposed over a teardrop that falls heavily onto the scale.

In this scene from *My Mad Fat* Diary (E4 2013-2015; "It's a Wonderful Rae, Part Two"), fat protagonist Rae experiences the fantasy of unzipping her skin, removing the layers that stand between her true, inner self and the world around her. Rae's dream is to embody her authentic self not just as someone who is idyllically thin, but, more accurately, as the thin woman *already within* her fat body. She cannot be quite whole or entirely real until she "burns away the fat," and since multiple attempts at dieting and exercise have had the opposite effect, this dreamy fantasy represents Rae's only option. This scene is a striking representation of the popular trope of the "thin woman within" (TWW), readily

found in narratives about fat from diet programme advertisements, to self-help screeds, reality, and fiction TV.[1] The TWW is a concept both familiar and simple: below many layers of subcutaneous fat and visible cellulite lies a truer, thinner self who - once unleashed in an exertion of self-control measured in the number of pounds shed - will finally be capable of achieving "the career, the relationships, the sex, and the exploration [she] so craved, but was taught to believe off-limits" (Ospina 2017).[2] The very presence of fat, then, immediately incorporates and produces a host of moral meanings. This is clear in the explicit detail of the fantasy in *My Mad Fat Diary*, where the joy provoked by Rae's unburdening does not represent an abstract connection to health or wellbeing so much as the (brief) promise of a new and vibrant life in the world.

Drawing together Kyrölä and Harjunen's (2017) articulation of "phantom" and "liminal" fatness with an articulation of moralised neoliberal biocitizenship, I employ the TWW trope here to specifically articulate the damaging effects of repeatedly viewing and depicting fat as something extra-corporeal and controllable. In other words, I use the TWW to demonstrate how fat is constructed as a constant danger (phantom fatness) that is always in the process of being re-negotiated (liminal fatness) by people in order to qualify as citizens and be granted access to fuller lives. Fat people are expected to fear putting on weight and to carry their bodies as though the pounds will eventually be shed, residing in an undesirable state of friction somewhere between fatness and thinness. Rae's fantasy presents a useful starting point for the articulation of the trope itself, but throughout this chapter I more deeply explore the myriad ways in which this trope is depicted and/or subverted across televisual genres, where weight loss "journeys" are overwhelmingly positioned as dynamically sustainable (and easily concluded) paths to self-care, authenticity, and moral virtue. Thinking this through the "before and after" images prevalent in diet narratives, the punishing lens of the reality television camera in lifestyle shows and weight loss programmes, and the prosthetic functions performed by a reliance on fat suits in American

[1] Influencer Bethenny Frankel's bestselling book "Naturally Thin" (2009), for example, explains how to "Unleash Your Skinnygirl and Free Yourself from a Lifetime of Dieting."

[2] For this study, I have chosen to employ the gendered term "woman." I have made this decision to evoke the ways in which fat acts as a feminising force, inasmuch as body "bigness" and standards of beauty are gendered (Monaghan 2008; Monaghan & Malson 2013) and because most of the characters to whom the trope applies are women.

daytime TV, I demarcate a pattern in fat representation. Across these examples, I argue, the TWW trope illuminates a fat biopedagogy at play that portends to "control people by using praise and shame alongside 'expert knowledge'" and, ultimately, to enforce acquiescence to a set of "mental and physical norms" (Chandler & Rice 2013: 231).

As reflected in this chapter's title, I conceptualise the effort here as one of resubstantiation. With its roots in words like "unweave" and "unmake," resubstantiation refers to not only the act of making something "substantial again" but also to changing something "back into its original form" ("resubstantiate" n.d.). In the case of the thin woman within, I aim to unweave the intricate web of moral meanings that prop up the pervasive narrative of fat bodies as those which are not yet made whole. The register of TV has long relied on assumptions of fat as immoral, rooted in overconsumption and excess (Farrell 2009; Gailey 2006; Rowe Karlyn 2010) and the TWW is but one of many similar representative tropes; however, it specifically serves as a powerful example of the intersection of television-as-pedagogy with lived realities. Obviously, the notion of the thin woman within is not one that can be unmade solely by "improvements" in representations and receptions of fatness when the Western world is populated by inaccessible spaces and lacks a promise of financial and social equity. Rather, in line with the shift in studies of disability from a medical lens to a social one in which "an accurate model of disability is one that most aptly characterizes what it is like to live with a disability" (Riddle 2020: 1511), I endeavour to contribute with this thinking to the ongoing project of negotiations in fat ontology (for recent efforts in this vein, see: Yessica Garcia Hernandez (2020) and the white-centric concept of "thin time"; Mary C. Dickman (2021) and her unpicking of risk avoidance in fat pregnancy).

Before and After Images: Relations in Transformation

One of the most familiar representative tropes related to fat is the "Before and After" image. This trope relies, in regard to fatness, on images which depict happy thin people in immediate opposition to their prior fat selves. This might look like: a person holding their "fat jeans" out around their body to show the extent of their weight loss; a side-by-side comparison of a person who is sad and fat with that same person, now smiling and thin; a

video of a person in a chair or on a couch juxtaposed with that same person performing activities like hiking or swimming. Whether wearing a bathing suit, dating, or simply smiling, the "after" versions are positioned as significant improvements on the original. These contemporary incarnations of the Before and After play out in every visual arena from social media to television and film, with a particular emphasis on image and video sharing apps like Instagram and TikTok, where "improved" bodies can be more easily monetised.[3] While this very public (and simultaneously very personal) version of the "Before and After" expression is relatively contemporary, the idea of a changed, improved self is unsurprisingly nothing new (Sender 2012: 7). As one frustrated specialist psychiatrist called them in a letter published in the *British Medical Journal*, Before and Afters are a "time-honoured way of oversimplifying complex problems" (Baillie 2007: 8).

The modern Before and After image is rooted in much older narratives of body transformation. In her book "Fat Shame," Amy Farrell (2011) elaborates on the myriad ways in which women's' bodies have been held to unrealistic standards throughout the 19th and 20th century. At the end of the 19th century, fat women were often upheld as metaphors for cultural fears about excess consumption and consumerism; postcards throughout this period into the early 20th century depict them as sexually invalid and out of control. Many of the postcard images show heavy women as animals in heat, presenting their large, voluminous backsides to onlooking men, which Farrell reads as resulting in these women being coded "uncivilized." Further, while images of poor working-class men were sometimes shown enjoying these women's bodies, middle- and upper-class men were nearly always depicted as finding them repulsive. The implication, Farrell notes, is that men of higher status must discipline and civilize the fat woman (Farrell 2011: 71-73). Further, Hillel Schwartz (1986) and Peter Stearns (2002) argue that anxieties around fat - particularly in relation to middle-class bodies - emerged with industrialization and consumer culture, with fat bodies specifically signifying consumer excess. It is in these assumptions that we find the roots of the Before and After weight loss discourse, where the "before" body is denied existence and

[3] Although there are few academic studies of this at the time of writing, a search turns up a number of blogger-focused articles with titles like "Weight Loss Blogging: How to Make Money Around it in 2021" and "Start a Weight Loss Blog: 11 Ways to Monetize it."

considered barbaric/disobedient and the "after" body represents the desirable and controlled body (Browne 2015: 88).

Modern Before and After narratives are relatively similar across weight loss participant's ages, weights, or genders. Weight Watchers (now called "WW") advertisements are exemplary of this particular trope.[4] Before images are typically of poor quality: dimly lit, grey or dark backdrops, pixelated, awkwardly angled. The people depicted are often dressed in particularly unflattering sweat pants or baggy jeans and stand uncomfortably with arms to their sides, shoulders slumped, and bellies pushed toward the camera. They are frowning, sometimes the shots are even taken mid-blink. These images are then positioned directly next to professional looking, brightly lit After shots. The newly-thin stand in the puddle of fabric that is their former outfit, smiling broadly or laughing as they tug their waistbands forward.

Figure 1-3 Renee Kuhn was among 100 winners in a 2010 Weight Watchers "Role Model of the Year" contest (Albright 2010)

In cases of extreme weight loss, it is not uncommon for participants to stand in a single leg of their former trousers. The relative ease of glancing from one picture to another seems to suggest that any body is capable of extreme change, and that those changes are practically

[4] In recent years, WW has discontinued the use of Before and After images in their marketing (Larbi 2018).

instantaneous with the correct mindset (Levy-Navarro 2010). Temporality and narrative intersect in this way to depict fatness as transitory (Maor 2013).

The TWW trope overlaps with the Before and After, though these two concepts differ at their core, particularly in their relation to time. While the presentation of dualities like good/bad, unruly/controlled, excess/regulation are a constant in any transformation narrative and do contribute to both tropes, the differences stem from the tropes' relations to and intersections of temporality and self. The Before and After frame emphasises change as it occurs from past to present/future, focusing on the new and improved self in relation to the old, troubled self. In contrast, the thin woman within frame refers to coexisting bodies and identities that are negotiated both simultaneously and constantly. We see ideas of the thin woman within coded in both fictional and nonfictional televisual texts, from sitcom to reality show. Still, like the Before and After frame, the TWW trope is most frequently expressed through the lens of transformation - both the act of transforming and that of remaining static. Because makeover narratives are not simply focused on changing a drab outfit into a fun one, adding breast implants to a flat-chested woman, or subtracting girth where there is an overabundance, the TWW encompasses and speaks to the vast criteria for change embedded in these narratives. That is, stories on television that transform fictional and nonfictional female characters from fat to thin are necessarily positioned as transforming much more; they are meant to unearth a truer, better self from within.

As is clear in the example of Rae, the fat body on television is constantly striving for a thinness that goes beyond simply weight loss. Here, to be thin is to be "healthy and happy" physically, emotionally, and socially. Katariina Kyrölä and Hannele Harjunen's seminal research on the embodied experience of fat women displays the insidiousness of the thin paradigm. In their study, "even those informants who had considered themselves fat for much or all of their lives insisted that their 'real' selves should occupy a normatively sized body." (Kyrölä and Harjunen 2017: 101). This means that often fat women exist as individuals (and as members of their communities) in a position of permanent liminality. That is, although for many people body fat is more or less unchanging throughout their adult lives, fat people are situated in a constant state of in-between "where one is constantly expected to change and one's fat body is constructed as temporary" (Harjunen 2009: 64; Gailey & Harjunen 2019). Much as with the daily experience of the desire to be (or the belief

that the future is) thin, fat women hang in the balance between citizen and noncitizen, medical object and medical subject, sexual fetish and sexual being, terrorist and victim. Plus-sized women's corporeal liminality insinuates that life will not begin until they have stopped taking up space, until their bodies stop stretching on with no "proper" boundary between their own selves and the spaces around them. Yet fat is fleshy and soft and presses out against the sides of chairs and the bottoms of tables and desks; the lines between person and object are not straight or neat, both figuratively and literally.

It is not only a lack of boundaries, but also the muddling of a perceived duality that keeps fat women in this liminal space. The idea of a "true" self as presented by the narrative of self-transformation is one that stretches back to the fourth century, when Augustine posited the notion of an inner self who looks to God (Sender 2012: 17). Modern ideas of dualism, however, seem to stem from Descartes' assumptions of mind and body as separate, self-contained entities (Grosz 1994: 48). In her book "Volatile Bodies," Elizabeth Grosz (1994) delineates not only the damaging nature of this distinct separation, but also the problematic reductionism of viewing mind and body as entirely cohesive. In modern feminist readings of these dualistic concepts, the female body is often regarded as object "in which struggles between its inhabitant and others/exploiters may be possible" (Grosz 1994: 50). A fat feminine liminality – divided between mind and body - relies a sense of distrust and discomfort. And here, lies the potential for exploitation.

An enormous marketplace is designed around the eternal sense of process where fat women are always "on the way" to their thin futures, as the exploitation of liminality quickly adapts and changes to suit "the marketplace" as well as the wider cultural climate. Diet, exercise, and beauty economies have changed many times over the years to best adhere to a range of feminine expectations that rely on a liminal mindset. Take, for example, the shifting marketplace for corsets and "shapewear," or clothing that changes the shape of the human body by compressing and/or enhancing it" (Zanette & Scarabotto 2019). During the battle for white women's suffrage, images of fat women in bloomers and, crucially, without their corsets (which Susan B. Anthony called a "terrible bondage") served as cautionary tales for the ways in which white women who chose to be fat were traitors to their race and were thus uncivilised and "unsexed" (Farrell 2011; Strings 2019). Shapewear fell out of fashion as women turned to work during the Second World War, but corsets had a resurgence as the

war came to an end.[5] With changes in second wave feminism and following the publication of "The Feminine Mystique" (Friedan 1963), shapewear fell out of fashion again before resurging as Victoria's Secret became popular in the late 1970s (Barr 2013). Expensive push-up bras followed in the mid-1990s as curves became more visible in popular culture. And finally, the turn of the century brought the nude shorts-shilling brand "Spanx" to the forefront, crowning founder Sarah Blakely the "youngest, self-made female billionaire in the United States" (Zanette & Scarabotto 2019).

I place the example of shapewear as a "marketplace icon" here in order to not only reinforce the intensity with which liminal feminine bodies are used, criticised, and monetised but also to emphasise the distinct effect of liminality on security in terms of consumer biocitizenship. A fat person's recourse of action to citizenship is incumbent not so much on their self-perception but on their cultural making and re-making according to capitalist social codes. Shapewear has been a part of the pressures to appear thin, and yet has still been historically been inaccessible to large bodies. This has particular relevance in a post-pandemic era. A report entitled "The U.S. Weight Loss & Diet Control Market" (Marketdata LLC 2021) optimistically traces the futures of the American weight loss market by analysing the peaks and troughs of the Covid-19 pandemic. A summary of the report (Business Wire 2021; *emphasis mine*) reads:

> The U.S. weight loss market reached a record $78 billion in 2019, but suffered a 21% decline in value during 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic and recession. However, there were bright spots. Commercial chains held up well, as did the meal replacements market, frozen diet entrees, and multi-level marketing channels. Health clubs and most medical weight loss programs were hit the hardest … Due to pend-up [sic] demand and consumer weight gain in 2020, *most providers are looking for a strong rebound in 2021, as Americans are vaccinated and businesses reopen.*

In the cold and clinical language of the marketplace, the good biocitizen and the good consumer may as well be synonymous. With market intentions for weight loss laid bare, it

[5] One magazine article from the time noted that - since "war-time rationing" was declining- women had should attend to "an increased consumption of starchy fattening foods, with unflattering results to [their] figures" (Wilks-Heeg 2017).

quickly becomes obvious how and why a continuance of liminality is particularly beneficial to further "blurring" the boundaries of state, commerce, and the individual. As Sandra Soo-Jin Lee (2020) asks in her study of "precision health," a set of technological developments in health that overlap greatly with the weight loss industry: "to what extent does the participation of the good biocitizen translate into the 'common good,' and for whom?" This question haunts my coming analyses of fatness as failed biocitizenship.

Fat Suits and/as Narrative Prosthesis

Much in the same way disability scholars Mitchell and Snyder's (2000) influential concept of "narrative prosthesis" functions, fatness is often used "as a crutch upon which narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive potentiality, and analytical insight" (2000: 49). Mitchell and Snyder posit that a narrative depicting difference often works to correct ("prostheticise") some deviation through first exposing that difference, then laying out and explaining the origins and consequences of the deviation. The difference then becomes central to the story until the deviance is fixed/repaired in some manner, whether through self-acceptance or the finding of a "cure" (50). In expounding on this concept of narrative prosthesis, they further cite the well-known Dickens tale "A Christmas Carol" as a prime example. This story follows notorious penny-pincher Ebenezer Scrooge as he is haunted by three ghosts who guide him through events in his past, present, and future. Throughout this narrative, Tiny Tim, the "crippled" son of Scrooge's employee figures heavily in demonstrating the spiralling effects of Scrooge's avarice. In a glance to the future, Scrooge sees that Tiny Tim has died as a direct result of the family's poverty - a condition Scrooge could easily have solved by paying fairer wages. This realisation helps mark a turning point in Scrooge's life, helping to transform him into a better person; thus, Tiny Tim - with his representational, inspirational disability - is the narrative prosthetic upon which Scrooge's makeover narrative leans. This framing serves as the basis of a number of subsequent works in disability studies and has been updated and refigured many times in analyses of media and literature (see: Cachia 2015; Ellis 2010; Thoelen 2020; Wells 2021).

Although Mitchell and Snyder's definition initially referred exclusively to representations of disability in literature, theorists since have placed ideas of prosthesis in

the centre of dialogues on everything from technology of language to photography itself as prosthetic (Wills 2007: 237, Manovich 2007) to the occasional narrative involving fatness, as feminist media scholar Amy Gullage's (2014) study of fat suits in the sitcom *Friends*, which I will address shortly. Fat bodies, like disabled bodies, are non-normative entities that do not follow the cultural scripts written for them; fat bodies, like disabled bodies, are heavily utilized, overtly problematised, and highly visible. As Michael Davidson (2011) notes in his monograph "Concerto for the Left Hand", disabled characters are prosthetic in the sense that they provide an illusion of bodily wholeness that is contingent upon an assumption of what it means to be whole in the first place. Upon this invented wholeness, ethical and/or moral failings are signified through physical limitation; in the case of fatness, these failings are made visible via the cultural weight of weightiness. It is apt enough, then, that in many stories about fat, narrative prosthesis is literally carried out through the use of prosthetics.

Because of the wide range of immediate signifiers attached to fatness, the large body is often narratively adopted as a kind of shorthand for someone who is not socially appropriate - someone who eats too much, exercises too little, and is otherwise out of control. Representations of fat can be less interested in the actual character or her development than in the manner her size enables the moral of a story; this is made clear not only by the use of a fat suit that can be removed and replaced quickly (unlike, obviously, actual body fat) but also through the narrative itself. One well-known example of this is the narrative of Gwyneth Paltrow's fat character Rosemary in the film *Shallow Hal* (2004). In the film, Jack Black's Hal undergoes a hypnotism that makes him see "inner beauty" rather than "outer beauty." When he meets the 300-pound Rosemary, he sees a thin and traditionally beautiful white woman, with whom he is instantly smitten. Hal cannot understand why his friends and family are so uncomfortable with Rosemary's presence, nor does he notice the many visual punchlines that accompany Rosemary. She breaks the booth at a restaurant. She and Hal go canoeing, but Hal's side of the boat tips up high into the air, like - as one journalist for *The Atlantic* puts it - a "seesaw trapped in the upswing" (Garber 2021). She dives into the water when she and Hal go swimming, creating a wave that sends a child into the branches of a tree. Eventually Hal finds out he has been hypnotized into seeing Rosemary's illusory body. He is initially shocked but comes to accept Rosemary. Later, he even decides to join the

Peace Corps just to be with her. As the film comes to a close, Rosemary carries him off into the sunset.

While the film may seem to stipulate that inner beauty matters more than outer beauty (and that anyone who prioritizes the latter is "shallow"), Gwyneth Paltrow's massive fat suit – and indeed the entire concept of her fatness - serves less as a story *about* a fat woman and more as a tale about the general concept of 'inner beauty' despite outer ugliness. It aligns with cultural beliefs regarding beauty, positing that fatness is *obviously* ugly and disgusting; it is something undesirable that must be conquered. Like Tiny Tim, Rosemary's body exists mainly to teach Hal a lesson. Much like Ebenezer Scrooge, Hal's character learns the value of being a good person and endeavours to change his life to an incredible degree. The film seems to posit that the kind of man who could reconcile inner and outer beauty in such a large woman is the same kind of charitable, selfless man who would join the Peace Corps.

Shallow Hal provides a prime example of the way fat suits are utilised in cinema, and as such has been attended to as part of a broader trend towards literature on fat bodies and fat suits in film (Mendoza 2009; Wykes 2012).

Relative to this body of work, analysis of fat suits in television is under-studied in media criticism; however, there are a number of reasons to turn toward serial and episodic storytelling to explore fat prosthetics. American and British TV have seen a "notable increase in evocative images of the human body subject to exploration and manipulation" that is "permeated by fat hatred, fatphobia, and fat oppression" (Morgan 2011: 198; Smit 2014: 2). The intersection of fatness with Western, Christian-centric moralities reveals how large bodies are packaged as suffering from "obesity" that can be cured. Because this cure is seen as an option, the very existence of obese people's bodies serves as a political statement. Fat women fly in the face of white, middle class ideals; fat women openly in relationships doubly so, particularly in a social climate in which "civility and class are [commonly] entwined with sexual restraint" (Rosewarne 2014: 19). When a fat woman is portrayed as sexually viable, for example, it constitutes a break with verisimilitude, given the strong bias against the sexualisation of fat women. Thus, the "good American biocitizen," or the moral and upstanding person who best represents national interests, is not a fat woman (Morgan 2011: 213).

Susan Greenhalgh (2015) defines biocitizenship as a political belongingness that is directly connected to the body. A citizen in the Western context of the word maintains their citizenship, she argues, only when functioning as a healthy cog in the national machine. Greenhalgh posits that in terms of fat, the good biocitizen must publicly and frequently commit, first and foremost, to a healthy diet and exercise regimen. A person who cannot control their weight is a poor citizen, perceived as not only unhealthy but also ignorant of the common good since fatness is in direct opposition to neoliberal, bio-exclusionist ideals. Fatness is to primitive as thinness is to civilized; fatness is to poverty as thinness is to wealth; fatness is to disability as thinness is to ability.

The trope of the thin woman within functions so seamlessly as a form of narrative prosthesis because of these ingrained dichotomies. Weight loss can stand for character reform and even personality with little elaboration needed. The addition of body weight to a normally thin character can express and explain character flaws in shorthand and can help mark a thin character as existing outside a normative context, even when that character is otherwise normative in their present thinness. And indeed a number of contemporary, popular TV sitcoms rely on temporary fatness as physical representation of character flaws: *How I Met Your Mother* (CBS 2005-2014), *Frasier* (NBC 1993-2004), *That 70's Show* (Fox 1998 - 2006), *Mom* (CBS 2013- 2021), *Friends* (NBC 1994 - 2004), *New Girl* (Fox 2011-2018), *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* (Fox/NBC 2013- 2021). Many of these sitcoms employ temporary fatness as a joke in or as the focus of a single plotline, as when *Frasier* actor Jane Leeves fell pregnant during the eighth season and her character, Daphne, suddenly struggled with a season-long "addiction to food" that was conveniently solved with a trip between seasons for a tongue-in-cheek, nine month stint at "fat camp." This approach is not yet outmoded; the CBS show *Mom* used a similar tactic in season four (2016-17) when actor Christy Plunkett was pregnant with twins.

Still, most programmes utilize fat suits very specifically in reference to the past, with recurring flashbacks showing thin series-regulars in comically puffy, jiggly bodies with wide jowly faces and clumsy movements. These characters look, sound, and act differently to their "current" selves, who are considered by their friends to be controlling and hyper-aware. Both fairly straightforward male characters, Schmidt from *New Girl* and Terry from *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* provide prime examples of sitcom past-fatness as narrative prosthetic in a more

general sense. Neither character, though, is as illustrative of the trope as *Friends'* Monica, whose storyline consistently refers to her fat past, even before we see actor Courtney Cox decked out in ecru foam and spandex. As we've seen in previous examples, fatness is infinitely more stigmatizing for women and "obese" women are discriminated against more than fat men are; while women tend to report being afraid of becoming obese, men tend to report more negative general attitudes toward obese individuals (Wiley 2013). Given that distinction, Fat Schmidt and Fat Terry provide mainly a jumping off point - a chance to display the use of temporary fatness in male subjects as it contributes to humorous and light-hearted dialogues about large male bodies. In *New Girl*, flashbacks to gregarious Schmidt's fat past highlight memories of over-eagerness in friendships, anxiety-provoked eating, and fat-centric physical comedy (breaking beds and chairs, dancing with reckless abandon). For Terry from *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, fatness is a battle caused by a stress-related food addiction. In the context of both shows, these men have worked through their disordered eating through the exertion of serious control. Schmidt and Terry work out constantly and are hyper aware of personal biometrics from their current body fat percentages to their hip and chest measurements. In one addiction-focused episode ("USPIS"), Terry describesovercoming his cravings for food through intense physical reconditioning by plunging his head repeatedly into an ice bath.

In these examples, part of the joke of the fat male body is that it is an emasculated one. Contemporary correlations of sport and fitness with masculinity position the fat male body as effeminate and incapable, something that can only be overcome with a turn back to masculine energies. Because these are straight male characters whose current selves present (or attempt to present) as hypermasculine, humour stems from this difference. Fat Schmidt is often shown spilling over his dorm room bed, weeping about something nonessential and bingeing on ice cream and cookies. Fat Terry feels diametrically opposed to the normally energetic but relatively no-nonsense (regular) Terry. One key *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* flashback follows Fat Terry on a "rock bottom moment" as he barrels down the street towards a clearly closed Chinese restaurant ("USPIS"). When he realises the door is locked he loses his temper, crashing through the glass door, screaming: "I need my moo shu pork!" For Fat Terry and Fat Schmidt, prosthetic fat creates a distance between performer and body, highlighting a humorous un-reality. As a result, the audience is permitted to laugh from a

position of superiority without the requisite cruelty of laughing at an authentically fat or effeminate character.

The treatment of Fat Monica's character is by nature markedly different, particularly the narrative expectations placed upon her and the jokes told at her expense. Seeing this, we can unpack the various layered notions that separate ideas of thinness and fatness and identify ways in which temporary fatness acts as narrative prosthetic and ultimately affects embodied characterization. There are aspects of Monica's character that are not a far cry from Terry and Schmidt. Gullage notes, "like Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, the fat prosthetic effectively creates two versions of the same character: Fat Monica and Monica" (2014: 185). In this way, the understood split between fat person and thin person is made immediately literal, the fat body removed to display the true, thin body below. This is a rebirth, in which characteristics and labels associated with fat bodies are immediately removed upon the reveal of a character's thinness (Harjunen 2017). The show toys with the assumption that the baggage of fatness *should be* erased with weight loss and draws humour from the truth of Monica's character: she cannot escape her fat self. Despite her obsession with cleanliness and order and striving to perfectionism as a chef and as self-appointed head of the household, Monica is ever at risk of slipping into old immoral eating habits and returning to her "old self." Because the thin person within has taken control, Monica must maintain a lifestyle within strict limits and boundaries. She is haunted, as Kyrölä (2017) puts it, by "phantom fat," aware she could put the weight back on at any time if she strays from those restrictions. This characterisation speaks again to that Western cultural baggage of constant self-improvement, in which control equates with morality and thinness indicates work ethic, discipline, self-control, and moral fortitude (Stearns). It also stands as an example of the widely held belief that fat can be determined away, and that weight loss is a simple choice -- an illusion upheld by use of the fat suit itself, which is as easily removed as any other item of clothing.

Depictions of fatness sharply differ between these characters as a result of their gender. Fat Terry and Fat Schmidt carry on successful and loving relationships, but fat signifies a kind of desexualisation and depersonalisation for Monica. Sexuality is innately tied up in notions of her body size - so much so that even long after she has lost the weight, her love life is fraught with complication and regret. Storylines dealing with Monica's

sexuality place her character within a kind of stasis, relying on the idea that she has yet to "recover" from her former fatness and covertly suggesting that because of this she cannot maintain or create a new healthy relationship. Arguably each character in *Friends* lives in a kind of incestuous stasis with one another, their dating lives, home lives, and daily interactions fully entwined for ten seasons. But, as narrative prosthetic, Fat Monica specifically exists in a state of liminality. Her body and her relationships are frozen forever between that nice-but-fat child/young adult and rigidly controlled adult woman. Thus, Fat Monica's first kiss is literally an act of incest, albeit accidental; her brother Ross thinks he is kissing his girlfriend (and her best friend) Rachel, while Fat Monica thinks she is getting a surprise midnight visit from a gentleman caller ("The One Where the Stripper Cries"). In her thin life, Monica's romantic relationships continue to eerily echo her familial relationships, as though she cannot break free of the person she was when fat - a sister and a daughter. Early in the series, she dates her father's former colleague Richard - a man twenty years her senior who played an active role in her formative years. She later dates and marries Chandler, her brother's best friend and former college roommate, and plausibly a stand in for the role Ross plays as Monica's brother.

For Monica to have had a healthy relationship as a fat woman would require her to live outside of the normative bubble in which the titular friends reside. Instead, her fat self exists as evidence of sociocultural assumptions and anxieties, reinforcing notions about weight loss as a determiner of personhood while displaying the haunting fat that plagues her into her thin life. It is not only her dating life but also her later inability to become pregnant that illustrates Monica's inability to move forward. Finding it difficult to conceive a child with Chandler, Monica visits her doctor and is diagnosed with a hostile cervical environment, meaning she is unable to conceive. For Monica, whose notions of self-worth are tied up entirely in the perceived healthiness and perfection of her thin body, this is yet another lingering symptom of liminality. Here, she serves as a cautionary tale as much as she acts as a punchline.

We see echoes of this experience in the use of fat suits in reality television narratives as well. I have discussed already that stories told about fat and about fat people are predicated on philosophies that are distinctly interrelated to emotional/psychological/biopolitical gain and loss. I have also addressed a few ways in which the "reality" of reality television exists

in a world in which typical sociocultural assumptions about adiposity are the only truth. These narratives rarely stray from a focus on the normative body as acceptable, and even when nonnormative bodies are shown, they are typically in pursuit of normativity. While Fat Monica's fat suit traps her in a state of liminality, fat suits in reality television tend to be utilized merely as narrative prosthetic, serving to marginalise authentic fat while emphasising the thinness of the literal woman within. Fat suits are frequently used as a tool enabling thin women to experience fatness as a social experiment, as on a 2005 episode of *The Tyra Banks Show* (Syndication 2005 – 2009; "Model Madness"). In this episode, thin supermodel Tyra dons flabby prosthetics and heavy makeup to mimic a 350-pound body. She covers up with dowdy pink clothing and wire-rimmed glasses to conceal her identity and takes to the streets. Hidden cameras follow Tyra as she shops, rides the bus, and attends three blind dates, all while wearing the fat suit. When the experience is over, she expresses shock, disappointment, and sympathy for the plight of fat women. In an interview, Tyra describes the experience: "The people that were staring and laughing in my face - that shocked me the most… as soon as I entered the store - when I went shopping - I immediately heard snickers! Immediately! I just was appalled and-and-and hurt!" (ABC News 2005).[6]

Footage of this segment is difficult to find (clearly Tyra recognises the benefit of hiding its existence, as footage of her show is otherwise readily available on Youtube and streaming sites). It exists in articles from the time, cultural memory, and in the many copycat reality show hosts who have enacted similar stunts in the years since - among them Melissa Gorga, Vanessa Minnillo, and Doctor Oz. Of course, these sojourns into "fathood" require only the briefest and most surface of engagements with the realities of being fat. The messages of "acceptance" and "kindness" are ultimately muddled as the camera hovers over the horrified faces of nearby pedestrians, played over audio of cruel slurs and sneering remarks. Use of the fat suit as an imitative narrative crutch not only dilutes the authentic fat experience to a few awkward looks and bad dates, but also limits the power of fat people as a group. That is, thin bodies utilizing fat prosthetics rob authentically fat bodies of control over the way they choose to be seen and depicted (LeBesco 2005: 234). It is doubly

[6] This social experiment involving public shaming is pervasive in reality TV. Shows like *What Not to Wear* or *10 Years Younger* rely the tactic of sending participants out onto busy streets and asking passersby for comments on their appearance (Palmer 2008).

problematic for fat women who, despite being situated in very real, non-normative bodies, are frequently discussed and shown as "wearing" (and importantly, *choosing* to wear) their bodies (Miller 2015: 9). Of course, in reality, fat is not so easily removed and the women inside the fat bodies are not so easily separated from fat existence. This narrative - the simplistic idea that people should be kinder to fat people because there is a thin person inside that is "just like you!" - relies on the reflexive agreement that wearing a fat suit for a few hours is enough to understand the experiences of the contemporary fat woman. And even without a direct transformation story, the reality programme relies on a buy-in from its fat participants as well as from its audience. Both must agree that weight loss is an end-all, be-all transformative solution to a person's struggles.

As I have shown to this point, the current pervasive social discourse contends that all weight can be lost, and all bodies can be changed. This discourse revolves around what Valerie Harwood terms biopedagogy in which "across a range of contemporary contexts are instructions on *bios:* how to live, how to eat, how much to eat, how to move, how much to move" (Harwood 2012). As a result, fatness is rarely discussed in terms of permanence and is instead framed as something to learn to avoid. These are part of a system in which fault and blame is placed on perpetrators of non-normativity, maintaining a social balance in which individuals who internalise such instructions and constructions are praised and upheld. "In a culture that judges a person's moral worth by their weight," Chandler and Rice state plainly, "fatness has emerged as a sign of physical and social unfitness" and thus, the trope of the thin woman within is internalized to the extent that both fat and thin women can believe it without question (2013: 235).

Within these pervasive biopedagogies, the subject is denied embodiment and "proper" personhood or citizenship and thus is relegated to experiencing fatness from within a type of corporeal prison. Footage of one slightly larger-scale experiment carried out on *The Tyra Banks Show* opens on a blonde woman alone in a grey room containing only a mirror. She has a slightly overweight build and stands analysing herself in the mirror. She is dressed in a tan-coloured form-fitting bodysuit. The only light seems to come from a high angle, throwing the curves beneath and between her stomach, hips and thighs into stark relief. She looks over her form, detailing for the camera exactly what it is she dislikes about her body. "I have six different sets of love handles… I try to focus on my face. I don't even

look down there." This nameless woman is part of the "Bodyville" experiment, a segment for Tyra's show in which ten women of various shapes and sizes don tan bodysuits and make snap judgments about one another based on first look. Each woman wears a sign around her neck delineating the stereotype the other nine women believe she embodies - this sign becomes a nametag, with women referring to one another as "Rockin Bod" and "Unhealthy." Although there are a number of women wearing unflattering names, the blonde woman is the one we follow throughout the process. The group of women first stare at her body, critiquing and analysing each and every curve and dimple themselves, only moments after she has done so herself. Among a number of available categories, they decide she best fits the term "Couch Potato."

In each of Tyra's segments on female fatness - and there are a number - the show seeks an emphasis on public and private reactions, often without allowing or airing any real response from the subject. In the second segment of the experiment, for example, the women assign jobs to one another based on their "interpretations of each other's bodies." Couch Potato is assigned "phone sex operator." She asks: "is it because I'm heavy so I have to hide behind the phone?" The women nod in assent. "Yes, I think Couch Potato. She's in her house, behind the scenes. Nobody knows what she really looks like. She's a fantasy in guys' minds." Couch Potato is not given a chance to defend herself, thereby further ascribing truth to the assumptions of her peers. In an aside, Tyra calls this "truth" a form of healing, though it is unclear for whom. Despite its final sentimental message – a hollow and vague call for kindness and healing among groups of women – the show uses Couch Potato's fat body as a tool to reinforce an already commonplace message. Biopedagogically speaking, fatness is horrifically visible and universally disgusting, and everybody makes snap assumptions through their stares. It is only when people cannot see Couch Potato that she might be found attractive.

Rebecca Puhl shows across a number of in-depth studies on effects of fat stigma and poor representation that shame and blame of this sort impacts fat women negatively and "interferes with efforts to improve health" (Puhl & Brownell 2001: 795). The presumption of blame on fat bodies serves only to further stigmatise and delegitimise/invalidate a measurably large percentage of the American (and global) population. In recent years, the condition of "obesity" has been added to the DSM V (the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual

of Mental Disorders), further confirming and validating the existing biopedagogy of the fat body (Morgan 2011: 214). The issue crosses to both sides of the political aisle as well, despite a concerted effort among liberal-identifying individuals to become more body-positive. Fights against fat shaming among individuals and groups who saw themselves as falling into the categories of those "more consciously liberal, tolerant, and ironic, and perhaps polite" seem more concerned with the "*manner* or tone of prejudicial address (e.g. if it was cruel or mean), rather than the actual underpinning message" (Raisborough 2016: 163). That underpinning message, in other words, remains culturally legitimised. Because of years of media and political focus on the fat body as a location of national distress, Susan Greenhalgh argues, people "seem to feel that… everyone is responsible for maintaining a normal BMI, the irresponsible, selfish people who refuse to do so, and harm the rest of us, fully deserve the derision, condemnation, and censure they get (Greenhalgh 2012: 268). And yet study after study shows this style of condemnation directly and *immediately* adversely affects people with large bodies (Bacon 2008; Campos 2004; Lucchesi 2015).

The increasing cultural legitimisation of fat as extraneous and prosthetic is reflected in the increasing ease with which more recent reality TV addresses and depicts fat bodies. The new BBC Scotland show *Secret Body* (2022 -), for example, offers an "undercover body transformation programme" in which participants are given twelve weeks to drop as much weight as possible while tricking their friends and family into believing nothing has changed. In the pursuit of this ruse, the show employs (as most weight-loss makeover shows do) a team of personal trainers to encourage transformation; however, there is a twist. Throughout the course of training, entrants wear bespoke fat suits modelled on their own "before" bodies to continue the ruse that nothing has changed. A segment from the 2019 test pilot episode finds participant Ashley and her mum marvelling at the heft and weight of her own specially-moulded suit. As Ashley slips the black prosthetic outfit from a sleek garment bag, she and her mother gasp at all the padding. Squishing at the belly-shaped cushion that represents the weight lost from Ashley's "problem area," her mother nods approvingly. "This is essentially," she marvels to her slimmed down daughter, "the outer shell of the old you."

Fat Failure: Fight of my 600-Lb life

The liminality of the fat body is not a neutral quality. Rather, the perceived correlation between the liminality of fatness and the lived expression of anti-citizenship allows fatness to become equated with horrors as gargantuan (and, often, ephemeral) as domestic terrorism. The US Surgeon General has literally described fatness in these terms, calling it "a threat that is every bit as real to America as *weapons of mass destruction*" (Evans 2010). There is little basis for such employment of a "terrifying parade" of life- and nation-changing illnesses related to fat (Greenhalgh 2015: 22, Raisborough 2016: 51). And yet, the militarisation of fat - including the discipline and training involved in making bodies stronger and more powerful - is sometimes even literally put into action in reality television through "boot camp" workouts led by drill sergeant-types or even actual veterans (Zimdars 2017). This tone is carried out in British limited series *Fat: The Fight of My Life* (2013), which focuses on the dangers of obesity and easily positions its participants as directly anti-citizen (Morgan 2011: 191). Even the use of the word "fight" in the title evokes the image of physical struggle.

By placing individual fat women in this position, shows of *Fight of My Life*'s ilk lean on reductive cultural stigmas surrounding fatness, relying on these ingrained stigmas to propel a cohesive nationalised narrative to a tidy conclusion. *Fight of My Life* focuses on a new participant every episode, following them through a year of significant changes to and monitoring of their diet and exercise regimens. Host Jesse Pavelka is a thin, white American physical trainer who, for a period in the mid-2000s, featured as a host and trainer in British extreme weight loss programmes; his success in television has dropped in recent years in favour of his "wellness" company and personal brand, Pavelka Wellness (PavelkaWellness.com). However, in this show he plays the consummate host, dropping in for visits to participants' homes throughout the year in order to carry out emotional and physical challenges. He narrates the ongoing experiences of the participants from month to month, discussing their progress as though it were his own success or failure. Always decked out in his uniform of svelte workout clothes, Pavelka presents as an American hero, practically a GI Joe, when he arrives on the scene. He has come to punish people for rebelling with their bodies and then, with any luck, to reform them into model citizens. Elements of body horror and staring (particularly the staring eye of the camera that lingers on thick rolls

of belly fat, red skin, and drips of sweat) are utilized heavily here as well. The emphasis is on fatness as a burden to be shed, connoting unhealthy eating, poor exercise regimens and ill-informed medical care. Biocitizenship is set at stake as participants are chastised not only for their own ill-health (which is always portrayed as disastrous) but also the health of their families and communities. Pavelka accomplishes this through lectures, unemotional commentary, and forced breakdowns, in which fat people reveal their eating and exercise habits through tears. This format is clearly exemplified in the episode featuring 26-stone mother Leeanne Probert.

Leeanne is a 35-year-old woman facing down what she says is the "only chance to change my husband's life, my life, and my kid's lives." This episode opens on deeply private close-up scenes of Leeanne's body. The camera focuses on the overlap of her belly as she lies on the couch, the rolls of white fat that populate her back and side as she gets into the shower, and the jiggle of her thighs as they spill over the side of a chair as Leeanne tearfully narrates the difficulties of her life as a fat person. Crying, she recounts how her four children have experienced bullying at school as a result of her weight. Her husband chastises her - "you've made these promises before and nothing has changed" - because he fears if he dies she will be unable to raise and care for her own children as a result of her weight. We scan the interior of her small council house and the scattered toys and left-behind plates from four children, two with developmental difficulties. We see from the piles of papers and dirty laundry how she struggles to maintain order in her life. Fatness is shown as disorder embodied.

When Pavelka shows up, he first puts Leeanne through a battery of medical tests to "find out what this body can actually do." Language like this reinforces the idea of Leeanne as a thin woman trapped within a fat body - she is hardly in control of what her body *can actually do*. Armed with medical knowledge, Pavelka's first challenge to Leeanne is to hike to the top of a mountain - an image that calls to mind the long-standing tradition of metaphorical linearity as part and parcel to white, middle-class biocitizenship (upward movement as positive, downward as failing and undesirable; heaven vs. hell). The mountain climb also evokes notions of upward mobility, with the successful and wealthy Pavelka encouraging and lecturing working-class Leeanne as she attempts the climb. At some points, he physically pushes her up the mountainside, hands pressing into her lower back until

Leeanne begins to panic. Her breathing gets short, her face red and sweaty, her hands clasp desperately above her head. Tears spring to her eyes.

Finally at the top, with Leeanne out of breath and deeply anxious, Pavelka evokes a terrifying image: “You’re 26 stone now. If you put on a stone a year, imagine how big you’ll be by 40.” Statements like this call upon a tradition in reality television. Scare tactics imagining a terrifying immediate future are part of a neoliberal agenda, a chance to educate and course correct self-neglect and ignorance (Oulette and Hay 2008: 138). Leeanne’s life, it seems, hangs in the balance. Pavelka tells her that losing the weight is a “black and white” issue of “hard work.” To the audience he confidently confides that “her weight is a consequence of her bad choices.” The mountain climb is a test which Leeanne feels she’s failed, and the coming year is a chance to redeem herself and save her family. We see Leeanne exercising with a trainer and at home throughout the year, with Pavelka showing up after she’s lost some weight to take her on a health retreat and to go kayaking, an activity framed as something she never could have tried at her previous weight (though in actuality it is unlikely she would have been able to afford this kind of holiday without the sponsorship of the TV programme). The kayak trip is identified as a turning point for Leeanne, arguably a perceived breaking of another type of fat liminality as described by Harjunen.

This kind of liminality is purely experiential, an in-between state caused by the postponement of life in wait for a future “after” body. In getting in the kayak, Leeanne is allowed to move forward narratively. “Obesity is clearly not seen as a valid bodily basis for subjectivity. It is seen as a personal failure and all aspects of life are entangled with the experience of one’s body being different or rather not acceptable” (Harjunen 2003: 6). After the kayak trip, Leeanne considers going back to university to become a social worker and caretaker. The pursuit of good, healthy thinness has helped her find her true self and allowed her to seek out her true desires - ones much more socially acceptable than staying at home. After the year is up, Pavelka revisits a frustrated Leeanne for what he terms “crisis intervention.” She has split up with her husband, gained four pounds, and ceased regular communication with her assigned local personal trainer. Pavelka forces Leeanne from her house and brings her back to the mountain - very much against her will. Now six stone lighter, she hikes the path with relative ease. The show celebrates her achievement, following the climb with a series of shots showing Leeanne working out in the living room, standing

in one leg of her "before" trousers with her daughter standing in the other, and looking out optimistically from the mountain peak. Here, Leeanne has served as a story device - at her best, a cautionary tale and at her worst, a bad citizen personified. These images continue to suggest an improved life, despite Leeanne's increasing personal difficulties (her recent separation, for example); the show is most interested in championing weight loss and privileging achievement over negative emotion. Still, though, Pavelka finishes the episode on a more ominous note. "With Leanne," he says, "you're never sure what's going to happen. It's sad and it's scary, but that's the nature of the beast."

Fight of My Life is only one of many reality TV shows from the last decade that (varyingly) uphold the notion of fat bodies as anti-citizens by showing participants' inevitable defeat at unearthing the thin woman within. This failure, these programmes posit in tone with Pavelka, may be taken for granted as "the nature of the beast," but it remains unclear whether the "beast" in this context is the medical condition of "obesity" or the bodies of fat people at large. Looking at reality television on a broad scale, it is not difficult to make a case for the latter. Shows such as *My 600-lb Life* (2012 -), *1000-lb Sisters* (2020 -), *Family by the Ton* (2018 -) and *Shut-ins: Britain's Fattest People* (2015 -) make flagrant spectacle of fat bodies, positioning "morbidly obese" individuals as the unhappy results (or the cruel perpetrators) of systemic health failures, negating the complicated interpersonal dialogues involved. The camerawork in these shows is akin to that of broadcast news, wherein fat people's bodies are filmed in close proximity to emphasise size and amplify a sensation of disgust and abjection. Charlotte Cooper (2007) calls these depersonalised vehicles "headless fatties," in reference to the tradition of zooming in to the degree that the subject's face and head are never in shot; this is ostensibly a tool used to provide privacy to candidly filmed subjects - who are often shopping in supermarkets or walking outside, scantily-clothed on a hot day - but it has the effect of objectifying fatness, and, in the process, of demolishing the shame that might otherwise be provoked in looking upon these bodies in judgement. Headless fatties, in other words, seek to provoke a reaction from the audience that is not equally weighted in power. Instead, images of fat rolls peeking from vest top straps or pushing over the handles of a shopping trolley or spilling over the sides of a chair request a different form of looking: the stare.

Disability scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2002) defines staring by its difference from other ways of looking. It is, she argues, a "more intense form of looking than glancing, glimpsing, scanning, surveying, gazing, and other forms of casual or uninterested looking" (56). In a later work (Garland-Thomson 2006), she adds that staring is "the materialization in human bodies of a search for narratives that impose coherence on what appears to be randomness in our experience of the world" (174). Garland-Thomson considers staring as intertwined with disability, applying this manner of looking to sensationalised images of "novel" faces and bodies, or those that differ (in some spectacular manner) from a perceived norm. She separates staring into three general modes - arrested, separated, and engaged - to elucidate the "variegation within staring situations" (2006: 186). These ways of staring are useful in thinking through the ways in which very large bodies (known medically as "severely obese" or "Class 3"; referred to in fat communities online as "superfat," "infinifat," or "death fat") are tactically portrayed in reality television as the pinnacle of anti-citizenship: out-of-control bodies that have somehow morphed beyond recognition.

Here the language of the thin woman within remains, but to a different effect than in the tenuous triumph of Leanne's difficult climb up the mountain. *My 600-Lb Life* takes on a very different approach than *Fight of My Life*, though there are similarities. Participants in the show - who weigh, as the title suggests, 600 pounds (272 kg) or more - are all potential candidates for weight-loss surgery who meet and work with bariatric specialist Dr. Nowzaradan (or Dr. Now), one of few doctors who see patients of this size for the operation. There are no challenges in the show and Dr. Now is not particularly involved in patients outside their filmed office visits; as with Leanne, participants' "win" is primarily ideological - measured exclusively in pounds shed and weight-loss maintained. However, like *Fight*, there is still the sense of a hierarchy being invoked, with expert opinions driving the show and participant's reticence to comply with extreme measures depicted as actively dangerous.

Drawing less from the makeover programme and military experience and more from visually-invasive medical procedure shows, *My 600-lb Life* spends a great deal of time closely exploring participants' bodies in detail. Alongside intimate shots of legs and groins with lymphoedema, bedsores and rashes on skin, and distended folds of stomach fat, there is a high priority on the participants' adjusted domestic routines: washing, eating, drinking.

There is an invitation to stare through an anthropological gaze at Joyce, whose friend Dawn helps her wash and dry her stomach, or at Mike, who rifles through multiple bags of takeaway for his first meal of the day ("Joyce's Story"; "Mike's Story"). Further, because of the medical context, there is a tacit permission in the show to gaze freely upon their fat, disembodied and isolated from their personhood. Fat here is a medical oddity; though already widely considered to be suffering from a self-inflicted malady, these bodies are placed up for further judgement. In inviting a stare, the show invites viewers to participate in Dr. Now's diagnoses by performing an unfailing armchair medical analysis: these people need to "shape up" and lose the weight.

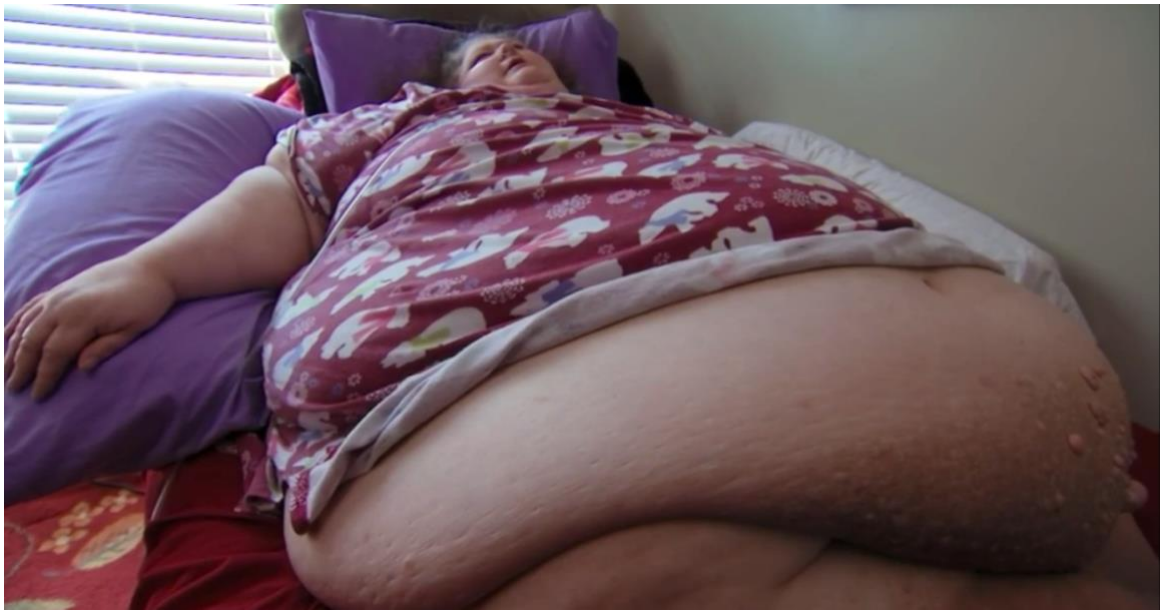

Figure 1-4 Joyce lies in her bed, propped up on a series of pillows

The stare posed by the programme, then, is situated not only in disgust, but also in a dramatic collision of tragedy and anger. Garland-Thomson writes that as the stare "both registers and demands a response, it enacts a drama about the people involved" and "reveals who we imagine ourselves and others to be" (2006: 174). In *My 600-Lb Life*, that drama is compressed into the barest, scantest metaphor of fatness. Fat people quickly become, in this context, not only failed citizens but also actively harmful entities. The focus on participants' difficulties in maintaining routines of self-care (washing, eating), for example, poses questions about their humanity and worth while continuing to situate fat in the realm of lifestyle choice. This is further upheld by Dr. Now, who is famous for a "no-nonsense" attitude toward patients that often leads to paternalistic and frank conversations. The TWW

trope remains here, even where the liminality seems to have finalised into failure, with these fat people now dependant on medical intervention.

In his frank discussions, Dr. Now recycles familiar neoliberal refrains. He tells Joyce of her hospital stay: "how long you're here is up to you, and how hard you want to work." He tells another patient who has not yet lost pre-surgery weight to "do what [they] need to do, before it's too late." He is famous, as well, for his outbursts at patient's "excuses" for fatness. Morality hangs heavy on the shoulders of participants, then, who are required to perform to Dr. Now's standards to continue to receive care.

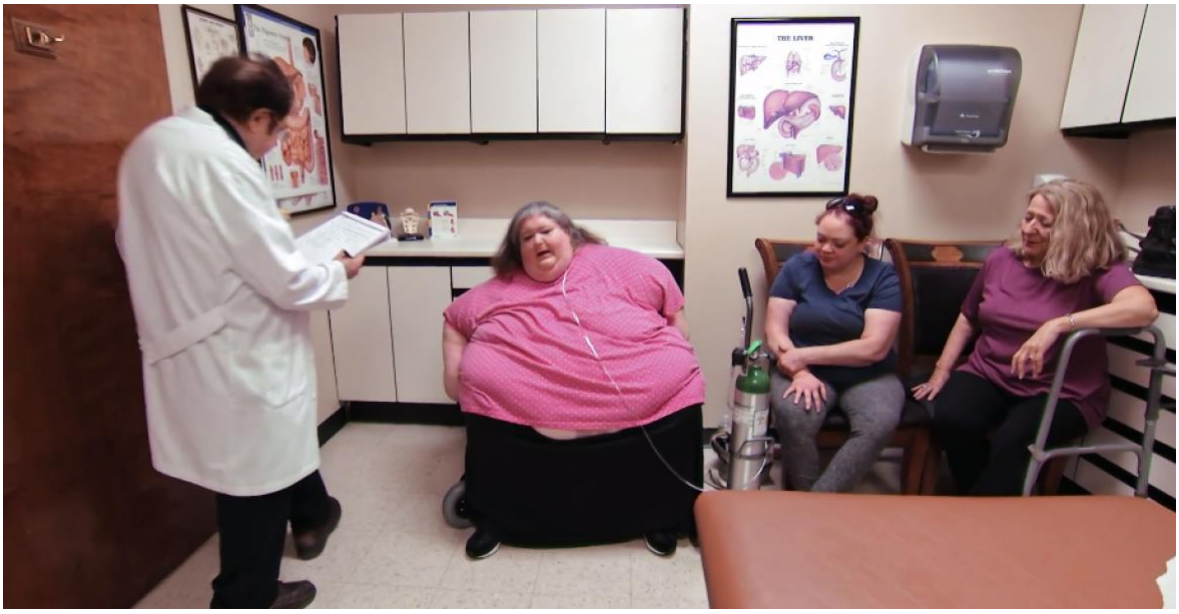

Figure 1-5 Dr. Now visits with Joyce about her weight

There is a real incentive to participate in the charade of personal responsibility here. For most of these patients, this is the only recourse to meaningful medical care left open, and it comes with a powerful financial incentive. The show does not award them with prizes (outside of a small cash bonus awarded for appearing on the show), but TLC does cover the cost of the initial surgery, which averages about $25,000 before follow-up appointments and plastic surgeries. If the patient experiences complications outside the show's one-year filming window, however, they become personally liable for any costs incurred (Gallup 2021).[7]

[7] Pressure ulcers are a common complaint among obese patients and can average $26,144 (approx. £19,834) per hospital stay. Extreme complications such as septicaemia can end up costing a similar amount at $25,800 (£19,573) (Gallup 2021).

Many of Dr. Now's onscreen patients have died after dealing with such complications or from lacking mental health support after their season has finished filming (Meltzer 2021).

The few who successfully go through surgery and maintain their weight loss echo familiar neoliberal dialogues, emphasising the freedom and strength of their thin women within. Brittani Fulfer, who lost 400 pounds (181 kg) says of the experience: "My weight was my prison. Now I am free, and I can do whatever I want, whenever I want" (Page 2017). With these ominous words, we return to the particular ability of shows like *My 600-Lb Life* to villainise and, simultaneously, to pity superfat patients. "Dr. Nowzaradan likes to say he has no permanent success stories," Fulfer remarks. "I may very well need a revision someday if I am not careful." As much as this language of personal responsibility guides participants through the show, it follows them into their lives after dramatic weight loss, in which their bodies remain uncertain and tenuous. This attitude departs from reality in ways that painfully reveal the costs of a solely individual approach to fat. In early 2022, much-beloved patient Destinee Lashaee - a trans person of colour who lost over 500 pounds after appearing on the show - died by apparent suicide (Felbin 2022). Only weeks before, Lashaee had posted a before-and-after video to TikTok and Instagram, showing their weight loss progression. The text superimposed over the top of the video read: "It's never too late to take back your life. You will win."

Drop Dead Diva: Fat dreams and deaths

Though it never manages to entirely shed the weight of cultural normativity, Lifetime Original Series *Drop Dead Diva* (2009-2014) complicates the usual prosthetic uses of fatness and harnesses expectations to imbue its fat protagonist with renewed and developing characterisation. Like many Lifetime women-centric dramedies, *Diva* takes a gentle and light-hearted approach to its characters and narrative, with most antagonists and conflicts being resolved in the span of one or two episodes. Imbued with a sense of magical realism and a heavy dose of positivity, the show engages the TWW at a literal level; that is, in *Drop Dead Diva* the protagonist is a thin woman who has been transported into the body of a fat woman. Within this high-concept, low-art format, narrative prosthesis, phantom fat, and liminality are employed in ways that both reify and subvert the notion of the thin woman within.

The series follows young, working model Deb Dobkins (Brooke D'Orsay) who has just been killed in a car accident. Upset at arriving in heaven prematurely, she slips past her guardian angel and is supernaturally transported back to Earth; however, instead of arriving back in her youthful, fit physique, Deb finds herself living in the body of Jane Bingum (Brooke Elliott), a 30-something lawyer with a neglected, fat figure and a lonely life. As the shock of Deb's new shape and size wears away, she is relieved to find she has, at least, gained something other than weight: Old Jane's remarkable intelligence and knowledge of the legal system. Thus, three characters are formulated by the show: Deb - the thin model, Old Jane - the fat lawyer, and Jane - a messy, ambivalent coalescence of the two.

While *Diva* represents a shift in representation toward a certain level of fat acceptance (as much of the journey involved Deb coming to love her new, large form), it also demonstrates a close adherence to the principles of narrative prosthesis. Even the show's description on Netflix clings to the ideals of transformation through experience of difference: "shallow, stick-thin Deb Dobkins learns lessons about the joys of compassion and intelligence after she's reincarnated as a smart, plus-size lawyer." Throughout the show - but particularly in the earlier seasons - Old Jane's authentically fat body serves as the prosthetic upon which Deb's narrative leans. Old Jane's body teaches Deb a number of skills and behaviours intended to address and solve Deb's narcissism: how to care compassionately for others, how to form strong arguments, how to see the world without judgment, and how to appreciate kindness. Jane is also granted a guardian angel to see her through this learning experience. In fact, by the end of the show, she has had three guardian angels (echoing the ghosts of Christmas past, future, and present). Each of these angels - Fred, Paul, and Luke - take a different approach to helping Jane live a righteous and thoughtful existence. Jane's guardian angels exist not only to help her navigate the ups and downs of daily life, but also to keep her identity hidden, as this is paramount to her ability to function as a person with agency and citizenship. The ultimate aim of the angels. and arguably the show, however, is to lead Jane to a place of self-actualisation. As a friend, lawyer, lover, and child, Jane must come to terms with herself as an embodied whole before she can access the things she comes to value.

Particularly in early episodes, Jane's values are created through a navigation between Deb's self-obsession and Old Jane's bodily responses to external stimuli. This new body,

Deb finds, has different responses to food than her original thin body. She now salivates over donuts and craves chocolate, often gazing longingly over heaping trays of junk food or overflowing gift baskets left at the law firm. At one point as Jane begins to panic when faced with the realities of Old Jane's gruelling legal work, her assistant Teri (Margaret Cho) rushes over, tips her head back, and squeezes a dollop of EZ Cheez into her mouth. "What is that?" Jane proclaims, "It's like Xanax!" ("Pilot"). Education like this is an integral part of Deb's journey as Jane, reinforcing the notion of fat bodies as uncontrollably conditioned to overeating whether or not their internal driver likes or wants to do so. While Deb seems to know better than to give in to the urge to overeat, her unruly and difficult body makes it impossible to act according to the bios of citizenship; she thus becomes a kind of warrior acting against impossible odds in ways that make her fat more acceptable and even positive. For Jane, choosing to accept her new body's "shortcomings" leads to self-acceptance and further embodiment. For instance, after spending a miserable day trying to eat healthy foods and exercise (she finds she can not even perform a single squat) with her supermodel best friend Stacy's help, Jane gives up and proclaims that her new stomach "just likes sandwiches."

Part of the acceptability allowed to Jane stems from the fact that Deb is an interloper in this large body. Because Deb did not cause Jane's fatness and has never experienced fatness as a result of her own actions, she has no need to take on a moral responsibility for losing weight. This responsibility still belongs to Old Jane, who, it turns out, lived a life typical of the onscreen fat narrative. She dieted heavily, tried dangerous weight loss supplements, and begged her doctor repeatedly for gastric bypass surgery. This is in stark contrast to Deb's opinion of her new body (after all, she is lucky to have a second chance at life). In one episode, Jane visits her doctor who is thrilled by her new body-positive outlook ("Do Over"). The doctor praises Jane for making healthier choices and forgetting about bariatric surgery. While on the surface, this might seem like a message of medical acceptance and appreciation for health at any size, the sentiment rings a bit hollow, as Jane has not experienced the corporeal, embodied experiences of a woman who has become visibly fat. Jane is freed - to a degree - from personal exposure to the cultural cruelty toward fatness.

As with this episode, the early seasons see Jane mainly as a thin woman within a fat woman's body – everything she does is a result of her predicament, so episodes that deal

with her new fatness can feel less authentic to fat experience. However, Jane's "failings" in terms of diet and exercise are praised here by a female medical professional, which subverts some of the usual anxieties played out on fat women in medical contexts and bolsters a healthier attitude toward fat bodies; it stands in stark contrast to *My 600-Lb Life* or to Tyra's "Bodyville" experiment. The show does advocate for a bodily outlook that accepts the fat body as a valuable and beautiful form worth an expense of time and effort. While Old Jane dressed in oversized frocks, flats, and bland colours, Jane wears power suit combinations, high heels, and bold statement pieces. Old Jane wore a bare face and frizzy hair, but Jane has silky locks and wakes up every morning (somehow) with a full face of makeup. Though this hyper-feminine presentation may further a heteronormative message, it is still unique for Jane to dress and act like a powerful figure and to be considered a sexual option for not only new men but also for a man who knew and loved her as Deb - her former fiancé, Grayson.

Deb, as the thin woman within Jane's body, is not particularly unruly nor out of control and has not made the choices or enacted the behaviours that immediately code fat as anti-citizen, but hers can still be read as a tale of narrative prosthesis and morality, in which fat yet again teaches the protagonist a lesson while informing the story. When Deb was an incredibly thin model with impeccable fashion sense, she was obsessed with her self-image. When she is first introduced, Deb stands admiring herself in a mirror, asking her boyfriend Grayson if her "knees look fat." When Old Jane was a lonely lawyer, she gave everything to her job and went out of her way to work pro bono cases and help underprivileged and underrepresented groups - but she had no close relationships, no control over her schedule, and a deep hatred for her body. Where Deb was immoral, Old Jane was *too* moral. Where Old Jane was weak, Deb was powerful. Where Deb rigidly controlled her diet and exercise and was thin as a result, Old Jane did the same, but remained fat. Deb dies while applying lip gloss in the rear-view mirror of her convertible; Old Jane, on the other hand, throws her body in front of a literal bullet for a colleague (one whom we later found out she did not particularly care for - making the act all the more heroic). Jane - with Deb inside her body- is portrayed as the balanced answer to both women, as Old Jane's body serves to teach Deb a series of lessons resulting in the creation of a new (and better) person.

Kyrölä's concept of "phantom fat" is also useful here, as the spectre of potential fatness that forever haunts the body is turned on its head. Rather than the spectre of fat haunting and threatening a newly thin body (as in my analysis of Fat Monica in *Friends*) or the prospect of further deathly weight gain looming over a fat body (as with Leeanne on *Fight of My Life*), Jane's body is literally haunted by a thin person. This is clear in storylines that centre on Jane's lived experiences as they conflict with or complement her memories of a thin, active childhood. At the same time, Deb is haunted by Old Jane's muscle memory and wisdom, a set of skills and intelligence that exists inside her body and springs to the surface, often without her immediate knowledge or bidding. The sensation of being haunted "draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically into the structure of feeling a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition" (Gordon 2011: 8). Jane's embodiment is clearly more elaborate and magical than that of the average person; it is further complicated as in order for Jane to exist as she is, a thin woman and a fat woman have had to die.

Here the interplay between two tropes – the thin woman within and the "dead woman talking" – can help shed light on deeper associations of fatness and femininity as identities that evoke anti-citizenship. Norman (2013) posits that a dead woman's speech exists to give voice to the voiceless and to open up new perspectives and performances. Although she can be read as a kind of ghost inhabitant, Deb-as-Jane does experience a sense of embodiment Old Jane never appeared to enjoy. Her living words act as a sort of feminine elegy for both women, with Old Jane's literal corpse having now become a speaking, reanimated vessel rather than simply a fat body turned into an object of mourning (an inherently powerless position). Imbued with this purpose and given a unique perspective on body issues, Jane is able to speak the unspeakable and act in ways inaccessible to someone like Old Jane. Jane, then, seeks agency and citizenship in ways that are rooted in the tradition of dead women speaking in American literature. There is a long and storied history of living dead women who challenge - however lightly - the social ills of the living. Sylvia Plath and Emily Dickinson, for example, use a posthumous voice to convey power in the face of sociocultural silencing. Speaking from the perspective of the dead, they are able to appeal for justice and posthumous citizenship. These women are "figures of potential justice" (Norman 2013: 17).

This is particularly profound as played out on Jane and Old Jane as legal professionals and is perhaps best demonstrated through Season One episode "The Dress." In this episode, Jane finds out she is not allowed to shop in high fashion stores Deb used to frequent. She takes one such clothing company to court after she is turned away at the door as a direct result of her body size - something she has never experienced as Deb. Jane is teased by her tall, blonde work rival Kim for pursuing legal action over something so slight, and Jane's boss begs her to drop the suit. She continues on with the lawsuit, however, enlisting a designer to alter the company's clothes to fit her plus size body, and delivering an impassioned speech to the judge. Despite this, she ultimately loses the suit. Here, Jane is simply seeking a kind of citizenship she recognises from her time as Deb and believes should be had by all. It is not until she has died and been resurrected that she is able to identify and thus address this societal lack. As a dead woman talking, Jane effects the kind of real change and exerts a kind of nuanced citizenship neither Old Jane nor Deb could accomplish alone. Further, Jane is able to convince the store that they are missing a gap in the market; they promise to widen their size range in the coming years.

Across the show, ideas of death and life interact directly with such conceptions of citizenship, embodiment, and value. Jane's early life is primarily dictated by Deb's intentions and unfinished business rather than by Old Jane's problems. As the show wears on, however, Jane becomes less like either Deb or Old Jane and more like "herself." In later seasons, Jane has thrown herself into working hard, forming new relationships and maintaining old ones, managing crises at home and at work, and acting charitably, continuing Old Jane's passion for taking on tough pro bono cases. When addressing the show as a whole, however, no one part of Jane truly dictates her actions and feelings more or less than the other. Rather, she quickly becomes an assemblage of Deb, Old Jane, her new self, and all their histories, memories, beliefs, assumptions, values, and experiences. In crossing paths and merging lives, they "create dynamic unpredictable aggregates," functioning as a finite (but open-ended) collective that constitutes a performance with the power to "provok[e] viewers out of their silence, vanity, and shame" (Diamond 2017: 259-260). This is clear in Jane's rich fantasy life, vivid memories, and wild dreams, in which fragmented parts of Jane, Old Jane, and/or Deb are allowed to come into play. In varying combinations and formats, each part of Jane informs a different way of being. For example, Deb was a

dancer and a model immersed in pop culture while Old Jane was a career-focused lawyer with a classically-trained singing voice; these aspects of their individual personalities come together in fantastical musical numbers. These interludes often incorporate surreal and joyful interactions (with the addition of Deb's favourite celebrities in cameo roles) and they mainly occur in the context of Jane's dreams, springing from narrative anxieties and struggles Jane has been facing in a given episode.

In one particularly boisterous number, Jane has made an error in judgment that has placed her law firm in jeopardy ("Would I Lie to You?"). As she tries to decide what to do, she falls asleep and finds herself working at a hot dog stand in a shopping mall, complete with a bright and goofy uniform. Here, she encounters Judge Paula Abdul - an aggregate character playing at once on Deb's obsession with *American Idol* (2002-2016, Paula Abdul was a judge on the show) and Old Jane's categorical knowledge of the law - who starts the musical number, saying: "veritas vot liberabit - the truth has set you free! … stay true to who you are, no matter what." Kicking off a bright, rock-n-roll cover of Eurythmics' 'Would I Lie to You?' Jane rips off her uniform to reveal a short black dress beneath, crying out the title of the song. She dances through the food court, encountering various characters from the show, made up of people from both Deb and Old Jane's pasts that have become intertwined in her life as Jane. Her boss is dressed as a mall cop, her "frenemy" Kim as a janitor, and her assistant Teri as an employee at another restaurant. This bubbly musical scene drives home the emotional impact that honesty will have on Jane while emphasizing the ways in which Deb and Old Jane's pasts and relationships inform her own. Jane's anxieties about her boyfriend - Grayson - abandoning her, about being judged, and about the opinions of her friends and colleagues all spring forward in vivaciously bright colours. As Jane ponders whether she is the true inhabitant of her body and whether or not she should keep the mystical secret of her existence, the show suggests a multiplicity of vantage points from which to consider these various personalities. It becomes unclear, through the use of this fantasy, whether any one of Old Jane or Deb's friends, colleagues, and enemies are themselves fixed entities.

The sensation of haunting and the unfixed nature of characters is also embedded in the text outside of fantasy sequences. In one episode ("The Real Jane") Old Jane takes over the body of a deceased lingerie model named Brittney (Natalie Hall) in order to take over a

death row case left unfinished. The swap is played for laughs, particularly since Brittney looks very much like Deb. When interrogating a client, Jane unbuttons the top of Brittney's shirt and coaches her on the process of flattery: "He will look you straight in the boobs. Don't be alarmed." Later in the episode, both women analyse their bodies in the hands of new owners. For Jane, "it's all about the right bra, comfortable spanx, good posture." For Brittney, her new body offers previously unfelt privileges, including "real" breasts that "stay where they are" when she takes off her bra. The episode ends with Brittney deciding to finally go to Paris, now that her thin body has provided a new level of access to the world.

Still, it is not until the final season that the message of the show is solidified ("It Had to Be You"). By this stage of the show, Jane has fallen in love with and started dating Deb's former boyfriend Grayson. Upon the revelation that Deb's soul resides in Old Jane's body, Grayson tells Jane he loves her, but that he views Deb and Jane "as two different people." While Jane has viewed herself all this time as Deb in another body, Grayson has fallen in love with her as Jane; it is only the viewer that has fully witnessed Jane experience the world as an assemblage, as a spectral being affected through three different women's experiences. This idea, however, becomes twisted again when Grayson dies tragically and returns to the world in the body of "Ian" - a wrongfully convicted felon facing the death penalty. After a lengthy legal battle to free Ian, Jane brings him home. They sit at the piano together, Grayson employing Ian's muscle memory for playing the piano and sings to Jane. Nestled in literary traditions of the uncanny, the ghostly, the hauntological being, Jane and Ian are both lovers reunited and souls haunted by the loss of one another. As Ian sings, a short montage of Jane and Grayson (and Jane and Ian) floats romantically across the screen: the exchange of knowing looks, shared laughter and tears, career successes. We slowly return to Ian's hands, which dance nimbly over the piano keys. Jane looks lovingly into his eyes, and the camera drifts away from the couple, coming to focus on a framed photograph behind them: a picture of Deb and Grayson. Comparing Jane and Ian against Deb and Grayson in this way raises a question of the difference between presence and absence, life and death, fat and thin.

Showrunner Josh Berman says in an interview of this finale: "There's a clear message in this series. It's about falling in love with someone's soul. Grayson fell in love with Deb in Jane's body, so it made sense for Deb — as Jane — to fall in love with Grayson in someone else's body" (Swift 2014). For Berman, the show has come full circle to exemplify a journey

of true love, regardless of exteriors. Despite Berman's insistence, however, these emotional transformations remain ambivalent; the show at once empowers the character of the thin woman within through its play with freedom and agency and yet reinforces the core tenets of the trope. *Diva* manifests the lived experience of inhabiting a fat body as a thin person by upholding the notion of body and self as distinct entities. By making the thin woman within literal, the show does offer up a chance to reread fatness as a construction and a lived experience that often does not resonate with reality. However, in that final image of the original thin and beautiful couple, *Drop Dead Diva* closes down that promise in its eventual return to the darker truth that lies within: thinness is a state of mind and fatness, merely a material shell.

Conclusion

The expectation of bodily and lifestyle transformation hangs heavy on the shoulders of fat women. The biopedagogies which dictate social constructions craft a unique and damaging denial of biocitizenship, expressed through the liminality and threat of the large body, the immoral frames of fatness, and the haunting spectre of weight. These images and narratives are espoused (and occasionally subverted) in TV wherever fat women appear onscreen, only to be pushed into the margins. And, even when fat people are presented with a seeming empathy, they continue to be filtered through an essentialised view of fat that reinforces active and good biocitizenship in comparison with lazy and bad actors. In promoting the distinction between the fat body and its thin mind, even work that tries to dignify and celebrate this separation often ends up reinforcing the TWW. The earlier example from *My Mad Fat Diary*, in which Rae discards her fat body, then, resonates as much in 2022 as it did in 2013. The fantasy of unburdening, of becoming light and weightless, of being allowed to inhabit one's own body free of moral implications stretches on from the fat suit in *Friends* to the most contemporary example in *My 600-Lb Life*. Fat people remain, for the most part, liminal actors tragically trapped within their bodies. They must, these television programmes suggest, free themselves by any means necessary, whether through fantasy, surgery, or some kind of ethereal atonement.

In considering the damaging effects of this trope, I am confronted with its most recent mutations. In 2022, for example, we are witnessing another turn in the discourse on fat suits.

After years of very minimal fat suit use in film and TV, big name celebrities like Colin Farrell (*The Batman* (2022)) and Tom Hanks (*Elvis* (2022)) are now turning out in fat prosthetics in Hollywood films; following Gary Oldman (*Darkest Hour* (2017)) and Christian Bale's (*Vice* (2018)) performances as Winston Churchill and Dick Cheney, respectively, the metric of fat suit acceptability appears to have shifted to accommodate for depictions of historical figures and existing intellectual property. This Hollywood trend has extended to television, where actor Sarah Paulson recently donned a fat suit to play White House whistle-blower Linda Tripp in the 2021 season of *American Crime Story* (2016 -). Renée Zellweger similarly packs on fat prosthetics to act as Pam Hupp in the true crime drama *The Thing About Pam* (2022 -).

Responding to backlash about her choice, Zellweger highlights the importance of character accuracy: "in order for you to better understand … what kind of person she might be, it just seemed really important that we got as close to that as we could" (Irvin 2022). The problem with the thin woman within trope is made clear, again, in her insistence. "Getting as close" to fat reality as possible means - to Zellweger as to so many others - that a good, thin actor should inhabit hot and heavy fat prosthetics; however, to many fat people, getting close to reality would be achieved by casting an actual fat actor, whose movements would not have to be synthesised, whose facial expressions and hand gestures would not have to be strictly coached in order to be "accurate" at approximating fatness. Fat remains the costume worn atop the real, thin body, bringing with it a host of meanings and morals, to be inhabited, and then discarded. In the mission of trying to neutralise fat as a hateful word and attempting to resubstantiate the role of fat people in history, we might find merit in thin folks empathising with the experience of being fat. However, until we begin to dismantle the many invisible structures that prop up representations of fatness, this kind of boundary pushing appears to serve only the thin actor - who often receives accolades for the sheer extent of their total transformation while experiencing few, if any, repercussions.

Because fat is not a neutral state of being, because it does come with meanings and histories, and because we are seeing very recognisable faces under the prosthetics, this new rationale for use of the fat suit appears to ask all the same old questions posed by the pattern of the TWW trope. It is not yet clear that fat suits can be neutral prosthetic tools - rather than narrative ones - while fat people are still so widely considered both accidentally and actively

harmful members of society. Acting as objects of domestic terror, or burdens on the medical system, or simply as the undesirable spectre, fat bodies continue to signify considerably more than size and shape. We will only be able to reframe the thin woman within by understanding the depth to which the notion has become culturally ingrained, seeing that even the most benevolent moral employments of the trope reinforce the entire structure. We must, in other words, make an effort to resubstantiate fat.

As a part of the effort toward resubstantiation, I argue for not only a careful unpicking of various individual representations but also of thought toward relationships. With the next chapter, I attend to what I call "fat-involved" relationships, working to demonstrate how fat disrupts, and aligns with traditional poetics and patterns between TV mothers and daughters. The chapter to come builds on the work here in undertaking analysis not just of the fat body as it is represented, but of fat itself as a direct actor within narratives on television.

Chapter 2 Television in the Home; Fatness in the Family

Introduction

At least as far back as the ancient Eleusinian mystery (i.e. the Greco-Roman myth) of Demeter and Persephone, the mother-daughter dyad has been defined through its relationship to seasons and cycles. The myth, as told in the "Homeric Hymns**,"** follows goddess of the earth, Demeter, and her daughter Persephone through a life-changing rupture that results in widespread change to the natural environment (Rayor 2014**)**. One afternoon amidst many years of peace and temperate weather, Persephone is abducted by Hades, the god of the Underworld, while picking wildflowers. Unable to find her daughter, Demeter's grief causes the previously bountiful crops and fields to die, bringing a famine upon the earth. The famine continues for years, as Demeter is inconsolable at the loss of her child and refuses to allow the land to flourish. Eventually, in order to restore balance, Zeus (Persephone's father) commands Hades to return Persephone to her mother; before he does so, however, Hades forces her to eat six pomegranate seeds, the food of the dead.

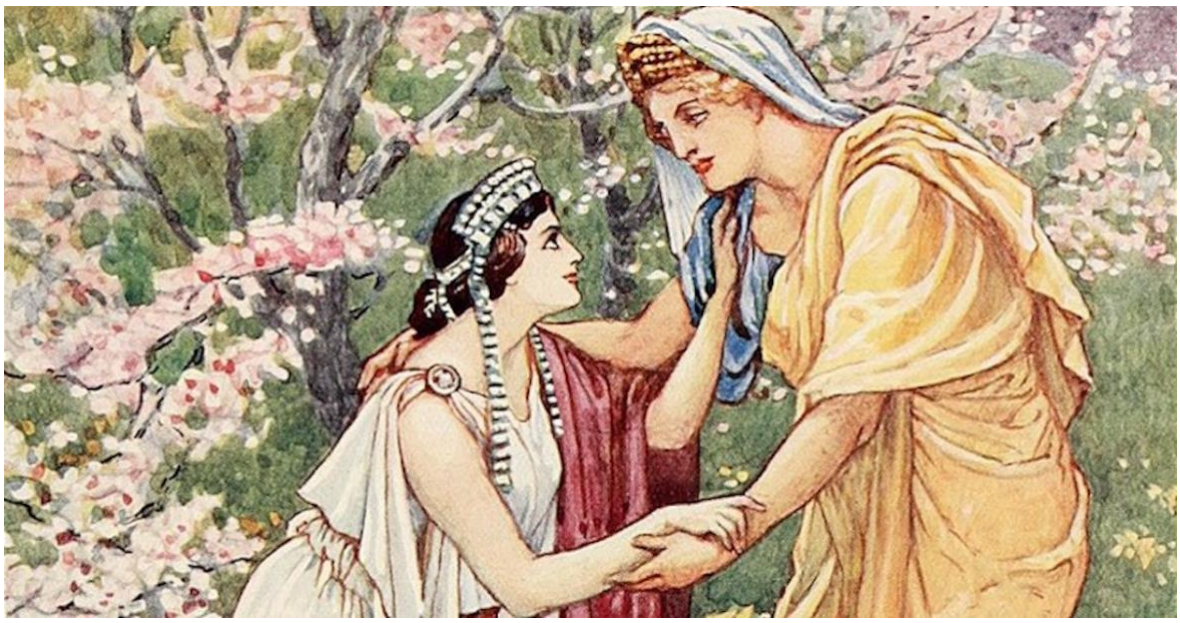

Figure 2-1 Crane, Walter, (ca. 1845-1915) Demeter rejoiced, for her daughter was by her side [Lithograph] JPG, Public Domain

As a result, Persephone is compelled to return to the Underworld regularly, spending half the year in the land of the living (on a bountiful green earth with her mother), and the other half in the land of the dead.

This myth - which exemplifies long-held patterns of feminine retreat and return - has had a lasting power over many centuries, and its various castings and recastings have been used to articulate a variety of (a)historical moments. To the ancient Greeks, the story symbolised the turning of the seasons: in autumn and winter, Persephone was underground, and the dreary weather reflected Demeter's grief; in spring and summer, Persephone returned to the earth and Demeter's joy brought long, sunny days to lush land (Pater 1876). Ensuing "phases" of the myth have morphed with changes in cultures and politics, moving away from its relation to the changes of the natural year and coming to closely inhabit a more personal history. Over centuries, the story of mother and daughter has been expressed in a myriad of artistic forms, from vases and sculptures to written adaptations of the myth as a powerful "story of human affection and sorrow" (Pater 1876: 260).[1] Like a great many other myths, of course, this tale is not comprised of immaculate language; rather, as media scholar Jonathan Bignell notes, "each myth has a social and political message, which always involves the distortion or forgetting of alternative messages, so that a myth appears to be simply true, rather than one of many alternatives" (2017: 123).[2] These myths, which we "take to be basic," ultimately determine "our vision of how individual subjects are formed in relation to familial structures;" thus, it is telling that the lines drawn between mother and daughter rely so heavily on the spiralling effects of apocryphal political and personal traumas (Hirsch 1989: 2). In the case of Demeter and Persephone, the many layered iterations of the myth have come to form a "quintessential mother-daughter drama" reliant on a narrative frame of separation and initiation (Spitz 1990; Horbury 2015: 125).[3]

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[1] British lyricist Walter Pater (1876) writes an extensive history of artistic and poetic uses of the myth, demonstrating its cultural power.

[2] Bignell is here referring to the legacy of myth with a more direct focus on deconstructing signs in order to decode levels of meaning in images and stories than on literal Greco-Roman mythology, but his point stands in relation to the endurance of the formal pattern of retreat and return exemplified in the myth of Demeter and Persephone.

[3] This holds true even as contemporary stories differ from the myth of Demeter and Persephone, with mothers often being the ones who disappear while daughters remain at home. Western literary history, for example, is "populated with dead, absent, and missing mothers—and with mothers in the process of marginalization even if they are alive and at home" (Francus 2017).

This legacy has proven powerful in feminist media studies, where Demeter and Persephone are often drawn into the conversation in order to speak back to patriarchal (i.e., Oedipal) representations of motherhood and daughterhood. Ellen Handler Spitz utilises the myth to unpack the rhythms and patterns of mother-daughter relationships in women-authored fiction (1990: 412). Spitz argues that psychoanalysis positions female-female relationships as "hostile" and even "sadistic," necessitating the daughter's complete severance from her mother in order to grow into an adult. However, she posits, this view overlooks the formidable rhythm evoked by the myth: mothers and daughters separate and individuate, Spitz says, but they also reconcile. Adrienne Rich powerfully evokes the relationship to further identify a motherly power that can "undo rape and bring [a daughter] back from the dead" (1976: 240). Holtzman and Kulish similarly argue that Persephone's story presents "a way of resolving conflicts about entering the sexual world" between women, without necessitating the complete divorce of closeness suggested by the phallocentric Oedipus Complex (1998: 1416). Psychoanalyst Bracha Ettinger goes as far as to label patterns of separation and initiation as evidence of a feminised "Persephone Complex" (2006: 19).

Television, in particular, has proven a fruitful area of study as it carries on the cyclical formation of mother- and daughter-hood in its connections to the domestic and the feminine as a result of its renewals, seasonal patterns, and time-spanning continuities. The "most common revision" of the mother-daughter relationship on TV is usually read through the Oedipal lens as one in which daughters are abandoned by their mothers and must seek them, "propelling the heroine into a space where Oedipal fantasies (and fears) about the mother (and feminism) are animated" (Horbury 2015: 171). In searching for her mother, these iterations tend toward heteronormative concerns, with the daughter acting out thorny relationships with fathers through messy sexual dynamics with male partners. Some popular examples of this dynamic include: the dead mother in *Fleabag* (BBC Three 2016 - 2019), whose two adult daughters (Phoebe Waller-Bridge & Sian Clifford) are eternally trying to reconcile her loss through their flawed heterosexual relationship dramas (Wilson Scott 2020) and in their father's distant affections; Shiv's (Sarah Snook) taciturn and cold mother

Cinema, too, is comprised of these "missing mothers" chased by their "desiring daughters" (Schemen 1988).

(Harriet Walter) in *Succession* (HBO 2018 -), whose secretive and inaccessible persona forces her daughter to return again and again to her ruthless billionaire father; and the frustrated tension and distance between Betty (January Jones) and Sally Draper (Kiernan Shipka) in *Mad Men* (AMC 2007 - 2015) which propels Sally to idolise (and later, to pity) her remote, advertising-mogul father. The mythical cyclicality of the mother/daughter relationship is upheld by the casting of generational difference as a pre-determined experience, inevitably enforcing familial distance between mothers and daughters and continuing to centre the role of the father as both primary hero and villain.[4]

As these effects play out on the small screen, mother and daughter still do circle one another, retreating and returning in a familiar narrative clockwork: Fleabag continues to return to her dead mother whether metaphorically (by stealing a small statue based on her mother's naked breasts) or literally (on her daily jogs through the plot in the graveyard); Shiv attends her mother's wedding despite the lack of initial invitation and shares a cigarette and a moment of sincerity with her; and Sally attends to her mother's affairs and the younger family members - despite having been angrily shipped off to boarding school - when lung cancer threatens Betty's life. The cyclical framework can take many other forms, too, but most often relies on interactions with domestic spaces and times. In *Gilmore Girls* (The WB 2000-2007; The CW 2017) Rory (Alexis Bledel) moves in and out of her mother Lorelai (Lauren Graham) and her grandmother's houses during family arguments over Rory's choices in partners or life plans - she even circles round and through Lorelai's past by literally sleeping in her old bedroom; in early seasons of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (The WB 1997-2003), a teenage Buffy (Sarah Michelle Gellar) lives a secret life in the night, sneaking out of her bedroom window to kill demons and meet her bloodsucking ancient boyfriend, while her oblivious mother Joyce (Kristine Sutherland) continues to uphold a rhythm of domestic and work tasks in daylight; Kris Jenner, mother to the infamously beauty-obsessed Kardashian-Jenner sisters, floats in and out of the columns and pillars of her daughters' various Beverly Hills mansions throughout the run of *Keeping Up With the Kardashians* (E! 2007-2021), where they often fight and make-up multiple times for the sake of narrative motion.

[4] Spitzer (1973) calls "generation" a "slovenly" term because of its ambiguity but argues that its usage remains "often perfectly intelligible" in context.

These few examples illuminate the ways in which infamous Eleusinian myth intersects with contemporary gendered representations of women. As a result of this formal pattern, a tale of intergenerational trauma quickly emerges in stories told about mothers and daughters. This pattern differs from the simple sense of cause and effect traced between parents' actions and children's behaviours; rather than a more general framing, the trauma shared between mother and daughter in this narrative frame is powerfully rooted in the moral feminine body through concerns over eating, appropriate womanhood, health, and goodness.[5] One of the effects of such a traumatic frame is the overwhelming sense that daughters are "haunted" by their mothers, whether or not they are literally present. This is further emphasised by anxieties over individuality and differentiation, as the overarching trepidation at play is that a mother will choose not to "subsume herself or her needs to those of her children" (Francus 2017: 25). In other words, in a cyclical framework layered with the moral and neoliberal concerns (particularly those embedded in postfeminist choice rhetoric), Demeter could decide not to cause famine and bring about reconciliation with her daughter, but instead to wander the earth, free and unbound, leaving her daughter to the phallic and dangerous Underworld, ad infinitum.

As issues of immorality categorically crop up in TV wherever fat is involved *and* wherever motherhood is invoked, their intersection intensifies anxieties around goodness, citizenship, and consumption. Embedded in this fear is the concern that not only will daughters be abandoned, but that they will not be shaped by their mothers into the "citizens-in-training" that neoliberalism depends upon (Ouelette & Hay 2008: 169). For the purposes of analysis, I term these relationships "fat-involved" to allow for a separation of the mother and daughter from too strict an identity politics; fat, here, is a lens that complicates, interrupts, and enhances this relationship, rather than something that directly and simply defines it. My primary aim in employing fat as something "involved" with mothers and daughters, then, is to demonstrate the distinct sense of presence and reality that is conjured

[5] In a rumination on early second wave writing on anorexia, Steedman (1986) describes Demeter as "stalk[ing] the earth mourning all her raped and lost daughters, prisoners of phallocentrism or the underworld." In this horrific, male-centric world, Steedman considers Persephone's forced participation in the Oedipal narrative by way of eating: "…once inside her the [pomegranate] seeds took on the weight and quality of horror, likely to swell to a mountain of food, manufacturing fat, swaddling and muffling her in a female body. Soon, she went home to mum" (8).

by large bodies in contemporary families. Fat is powerful not only in that it acts upon and intensifies intergenerational relationships between women, but also because it is so often expressed through mother-daughter pairs. Across melodramatic forms, investigations of fat continue to emerge and thrive in intergenerational contexts; the mother-daughter relationship is the focus of - or, at least, a key theme in- serial television, from reality TV (*Here Comes Honey Boo-Boo* (TLC 2012-2014), *Mama June: Road to Redemption* (WE TV 2021-)), to the popular women-centric dramedy (*Shrill* (Hulu 2019- 2021)) and the primetime serial (*This is Us* (NBC 2016-2022)).

Still, because of the wealth of existing and conflicting feminist writings on the topic, any study of mother-daughter relationships and television runs the risk of bumping clumsily into the postfeminist "impasse," whereby depictions of women are measured against their adherence to popular feminine archetypes (Berlant 2011; Horbury 2014; Thouaille 2019).[6] Evaluative arguments run headlong into the impasse by assuming it is possible to weigh up TV-based feminisms without at the same time reaffirming a great many assumptions about proper womanhood, "good" mothering, and gender-based morality. The stated origins and repercussions of the impasse vary across scholars and scholarship, but it is useful inasmuch as it serves as a marker of my methods in this chapter. That is, each component of my argument here springs forth for consideration in respect of its relationship to the impasse, as fatness proves constructive in navigating the gnarled relations between television, identity formation, and domesticity. Women-centric television programmes have a tendency to filter women's storylines through their relation to domestic spaces and family groups; this tendency is, of course, bolstered further by the simple fact that all daughters have mothers - whether good or bad, present or absent, healthy or unhealthy, living or dead - whose actions have necessarily had some kind of effect on their lives (Hammer 1976; Horbury 2015).

To explore these relationships further, then, I first look to the position and role of mothers and daughters in TV. I here set up the roles of domesticity, intimacy, morality and failure in order to better clarify the specific effects created by and through the involvement

[6] Feminism as a method in TV analysis has at times measured the degree of feminism within a given text or - following in the footsteps of can-do feminist TV like *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970 - 1977) and, later, *Ally McBeal* (1997 - 2002) - to evaluate the success or failure of "strong women" characters at performing as role models.

of fat in mother-daughter relationships. Next, I open up the dialogue to analyse the formal characteristics invoked by these relationships not just in reality television but also in serial drama. I draw from a range of materials, looking back toward the pattern of retreat and return between mothers and daughters; this pattern, I will demonstrate, creates a haunting effect that produces a sense of lasting trauma. Connecting to the rich history of feminist media studies and seriality, I extend my analysis through a look at the class dynamics found in popular American reality television duo Mama June and Honey Boo Boo. Finally, I move to my case study of NBC primetime serial *This is Us*, seeking out the intergenerational tensions embedded in fatness. Thus, in unpicking some of the intricate constructions at play in a selection of fat-involved mother-daughter relationships from examples across reality television and the primetime serial, I aim to demonstrate how fatness proves useful in cracking open roles and identity positions that may otherwise appear quite fixed or otherwise inherent.

Constructing Mother-Daughter Relationships on TV

Three people sit close together on a pristine white couch in front of a live studio audience: a fit-looking white man outfitted plainly in navy blue scrubs, a thin, blonde woman wearing a fitted lab coat open over a lavish gold necklace and tight burgundy dress, and a fat, middle-aged woman of colour in a loose blue blazer and simple black t-shirt. Behind them on the enormous and otherwise empty stage, two bright LCD screens display the show's silver logo and looming over the trio on a much larger TV, in shiny block capital letters, are the words: "SAVE MY DAUGHTER!" Bright blue light floods the stage and a heavy silence hangs behind every word as the show plays out without any incidental music, peppered only with audience applause for moments of performative kindness, like when the producers of the show provide a fat family with a year's supply of packaged diet foods or fund a teen to attend drug rehabilitation. It would be difficult to miss the air of fear and anxiety that hangs over any iteration of medical intervention-cum-confessional show *The Doctors* (Syndication 2008-), but it is particularly poignant in this 2016 episode ("Diet-Food Industry Insider Spills Secrets/11-Year-Old Weighs 300 Pounds"). The fat woman in the blazer is Julie, mother to 286-pound (129 kg) 11-year old daughter Miranda, who nutritionist Melissa Jampolis (the woman in the fancy lab coat) very sternly diagnoses with a heightened

risk of diabetes, painting a seemingly inevitable future shrouded in the spectre of "kidney transplant, blindness, and amputations."

The aforementioned man in scrubs is the show's host, Travis Lane Stork, a former emergency physician best known for spinning his turn on *The Bachelor* into a career giving "health" (read: diet and weight-loss) advice on television and in his pop-science books "The Lean Belly Prescription" (2010) and "The Doctor's Diet" (2014). His 12-season run as host of *The Doctors* was won after many appearances on similarly fear-mongering advice show *Dr. Phil* (CBS 2002 -), with the timbre of the show clearly borrowed from Dr. Phil's "'get real' curriculum of down-to-earth therapy - wrapped within [an] imposing physical presence and a distinctive emotional and professional demeanour" (Henson & Parameswaran 2008: 288). Stork's patronising tone and demeanour, however, is perhaps best exemplified not through comparison to his predecessor but from his own words in a 2008 book entitled "Don't be That Girl": "no amount of money, St. John's wort, or designer clothes will give you the kind of energy, self-satisfaction, and body confidence that come with a healthy lifestyle" that he argues is hard-won through self-improvement, avoidance of negativity, and, seemingly above all, being a "good woman" (2008: 8).[7]

This neoliberal attitude is carried through the pre-recorded segments of the episode, in which Miranda and Julie visit Dr. Jampolis for a physical exam. Jampolis quizzes Miranda on the foods she likes to eat ("sometimes I get a little hungry and I go get pretzels and dip") and Julie on the family's average meals ("our fast food, in our house, is frozen pizza"). Sceptical of their answers, Jampolis brings Miranda to the examination room, where the show continues to eke out drama by placing spotlights on the routine scenes of the exam as if they are of high importance: a blood pressure cuff around Miranda's arm, Jampolis' hand nudging along the scale, a BMI calculator printing results. At one point, the camera holds tight to Miranda's head hanging forward as Jampolis squeezes the back of her neck between two fingers like callipers, noting down information of some kind. The moral implications now driven sky-high, the segment ends with a reveal of Miranda's health outcomes in a

[7] In "Don't Be *That* Girl," Stork employs his credentials as an ER doctor to posit that women can avoid physically abusive relationships by improving their dating habits, and, more specifically, by being so "happy and fulfilled" that they do not fall under his eight categories of *That* Girls: "Agenda Girl, Yes Girl, Drama Queen Girl, Bitter Girl, Insecure Girl, Desperate Girl, Working Girl, or Lost Girl" (2008: 6).

dramatic crescendo; leaning in, Stork's face lights up with the faux concern of a television physician. Turning to a tearful Julie - before the inharmonious applause of a live studio audience drowns out a nondescript stock-music underscore - Stork delivers a final diatribe ostensibly intended to be helpful. "Literally, that sugar?" he begins, raising his hands for emphasis. "Every time your daughter eats it, it's like taking a gun and loading it with bullets."

Many of the themes that recur throughout this thesis are present in this short segment: the fear-mongering that circles fatness as an indicator of catastrophe and death, as evidence of poor biocitizenship, as a site of neoliberal personal responsibility, as a moral failing. Issues of race and class intertwine here in difficult ways as two white, thin, wealthy TV doctors criticise and inspect a lower-class family of colour. In this example and those to follow, the traditional "problem frames" of fatness are evident, raising questions of bad personal choices, toxic relationships to food, and genetic and parental failures. These intersect darkly with the consequences of an "ideology of total motherhood," or the moral code by which mothers are expected to become experts in every developmental field in order to "optimize every aspect of children's lives, beginning with the womb" (Saguy 2017: 35; Wolf 2010: 7).

So often depicted as the centre of fraught emotion and difficulty, the mother-daughter dyad offers up a reading of the incrustations of fatness among the family and within structures of TV that handily fall under the umbrella of Annette Kuhn's (1984) potentially outdated "gynocentric genres" or, more broadly, of "women's media." In particular, programmes with melodramatic characteristics - already heightened and exaggerated - allow for investigation into the way that fat intensifies the paradigms of maternal responsibility that are so fixed as to have become routine in American and British television. In part, this is owed to the tendency of reality TV, primetime serials, soap operas, and other women-centric television programmes to filter women's storylines through their relation to domestic spaces and family and their (dis)connections to "good" mothering and daughtering (Feasey 2012). Fat, in other words, intensifies the existing frames through which gendered, intergenerational relationships are understood and portrayed. The primary concern in *The Doctors*, for example, is not only to "solve" Julie's bad mothering but to discontinue her intergenerational legacy of fatness.

In attempting to fit Miranda and Julie's relationship into a patriarchal frame of motherhood (scrutinised through difference and transgression rather than empowered), the *Doctors* example also reflects a long-held concern in feminist media scholarship over the ways in which mother-daughter stories are condensed and simplified to the most basic Oedipal narrative rhythms. Adrienne Rich asserts in her influential second wave monograph "Of Woman Born" that she could not find any "presently enduring recognition of mother-daughter passion and rapture" in media; "this cathexis between mother and daughter - essential, distorted, and misused" she argues, "is the great unwritten story" (1976: 237). Rich's comment provides the basis for Linda Williams' assertion (referring to the 1937 film *Stella Dallas*) that melodrama might provide an avenue for a "female reading competence" that is a "direct result of the social fact of female mothering," rather than a by-product of patriarchal constructions of the family (1984: 3).

Drawing on Chodorow (1978), Kristeva (1980) and Mulvey (1975), Williams argues that although motherhood has traditionally been formed through "identification of the *normal* with male patterns of development," the multiple and shifting points of view inherent to melodrama could "prevent such a monolithic view of the female subject" (16). For instance, in a ruse to ensure her daughter severs ties with her lower-class roots, the character Stella Dallas tells her daughter that she has always wanted to be "something else besides a mother"; in this moment, Williams argues, Stella Dallas puts on an uncaring mask of motherhood that obscures her actual noble aims from her daughter, demonstrating the morality of her "sacrificial act of motherly love" (16). The excessive and emotional tension created here, Williams says, complicates the connection between mother and daughter. Williams' analysis touches on some of the key formal devices expressed through melodrama - multiple identification, excess, intimacy - and weaves them together by opening the mother-daughter dyad from its strictly Oedipal framework. Her influential work in picking apart the rhythms and patterns of melodrama that echo, subvert, and recreate gendered ideals of "womanhood" serve as a guidepost for her contemporaries and successors, who would take up such similar positions as to eventually form and shape a second-wave "canon of motherhood research" (O'Brien Hallstein 2010).

As Patricia Hill Collins makes quite clear, however, the positions that make up this canon primarily serve to address the myriad issues of, as she terms it, the Eurocentric "cult

of true womanhood" (1987: 3). Others have referred to the same phenomenon as the "cult of domesticity" (Maroney 1979). Collins describes how, by emphasising motherhood as woman's highest calling, the cult of true womanhood "has long held a special place in the gender symbolism of white Americans" that proffers, as a reward for the maintenance of a separate and immaculate domestic sphere, social influence for white women. She further differentiates the Eurocentric cult of true womanhood - whereby "mothering occurs within the confines of a private, nuclear family household where the mother has almost total responsibility for childrearing" (3) - from an Afrocentric construction of motherhood in which they share the act of mothering among Black family "networks" and work to build resilience against oppressions through that radical family network (5). While influential in presenting and upholding feminist arguments for abolishing sexism, writings in a canon of motherhood studies that privilege primary interrogation of the cult of true womanhood attempted to deconstruct terms like "family," "patriarchy," and "reproduction" with little regard for the potentially radical and already-subversive place of family for women (Carby 1982; Collins 2000; hooks 1981, 2002).[8] It is under the conditions of the cult of true womanhood that Stella Dallas wishes, however ironically, to be "something else besides a mother;" further, it is in response to these conditions that Adrienne Rich (1976), Judith Arcana (1979), and Nancy Chodorow (1978) aimed to disentangle mothering from motherhood, and where work to establish sexual difference envisioned "men as, among other things, also nurturers" and "their assimilation as necessary for human and planetary survival" (Maroney 1979: 49).[9]

That motherhood was often devalued entirely by this discourse - ignoring the subversive and loving potential of children and family - seemed less important than the emphasis on a mother's personal choices and freedoms. In kind, later postfeminist discourse - designated by the familiar "freedom to choose" - has tended to champion "successful femininity" that is represented as a "carefully balanced and closely self-monitored blend of

[8] In "White Women Listen," Carby argues that "during slavery, periods of colonialism, and under the present authoritarian state, the Black family has been a site of political and cultural resistance to racism" (1982: 112).

[9] Marianne Hirsch (1981) also credits Rich with lighting a path toward autobiographical or autoethnological study of feminist issues.

intelligence, independence, groomed attractiveness and sexiness" alongside a growing requirement to display adherence to what Angela McRobbie (2009) refers to as "gender retrenchment" (Butler 2004; Dow 1996; Gill 2007b, 2008; Jackson & Lyons 2013: 228). Motherhood, in kind, has not only been laden with the requirements to treat the act of mothering as a sacred individual duty (although this remains part of the cult of true womanhood); in turn, a starkly neoliberal attitude has emerged that insists that mothers become experts in every situation their children may encounter (Wolf 2010). As a result, contemporary attitudes toward motherhood are characterised in public discourse by "ambivalence, paradox, and matrophobia" (Kinser 2010).

The preoccupation with maternal agency, then, is an early indication of the discomfiting trend in media studies toward uncritically embracing a postfeminist sensibility as a marker of progress rather than as a complicated approach that often reifies the paradigms it seems to dismantle. This is clear, for example, in the fixation on the power of "multiple identification." First introduced in the late 1960s, the term refers to the ability of spectators to unconsciously identify with all available subject positions in any given narrative (Laplanche & Pontalis 1968; Modleski 2007 [1982]). This key concept within feminist media criticism potentially gives way to cross-gender, -race, and -sexuality identifications that open subversive avenues in representation, making space for audiences to break free from exclusively masculinised viewership. Through multiple identification *any* spectator can be allowed to identify vividly and ultimately empathise with the experiences of, for example, *any* mother character. Overdetermining the importance of multiple identification and generalising the role of the spectator, though, easily leads to continued problematic universalising of Othered experiences. In shifting and rotating through various meanings of motherhood and daughterhood, melodramatic stories may continue to make way for empathy and engagement via multiple identification; however, they do so under the assumption of a shared set of morals that are quickly complicated by the inclusion and involvement of Othering characteristics like gender, class, race, and, importantly, fat.

Seriality and Motherhood: Binding fatness and the dyad

Williams' Stella produces a complex set of characteristics that may indeed elicit empathy. Still, whether or not the spectator is able to pick apart the meanings of Stella's varying responses to expectations of her femininity and class, I question how her ambivalent

cinematic ending (peering from a window to covertly observe her estranged daughter's wedding) might be further tangled in the open-ended rupture produced by the serial form and the material excesses enabled by fatness. In *Stella Dallas*, we are presented with a melodramatic tale of motherhood that, for its complications and identifications, resolves in ambivalence. In serials, however, a pattern of emotional motion is created between characters that, although it embraces a similar level of ambivalence by putting up "a resistance to being neatly settled in the last five minutes," reflects and reinvents culturally-distinct patterns of daily life (Mulvey 1977: 54). As Jane Feuer puts it: "the good can never ultimately receive their just rewards, yet evil can never wholly triumph. Any ultimate resolution - for good or for ill - goes against the only moral imperative of the continuing serial form: the plot must go on" (1984: 12).

The plot goes on in serial TV through the looping and layering of rhythmic patterns which have produced questions around syntagmatic structures since the early 1980s, begging analysis of television's temporal engagements - as in domestic rhythms (Modleski 1983) characterised by "flow" (Williams 1974) - as well as of its spatial constructions - such as the repetitive pedagogical situations and actions (Kavka 2012; Ouelette & Hay 2008) that reflect and recreate gendered norms (Spigel 1992). These rhythms and tensions extend outward from the TV screen even as they draw inward from the outside, with the repetitive and familiar movements of daily life around and with the TV (as an object) producing in themselves discursive and experiential (dis)connections. Mothers' and daughters' domestic paths cross over and around one another - their arguments, their needs, their desires embedded in impulses and serial narrative devices that have proved "sticky" within the field of television studies (Creeber 2005; Ford et al. 2011; Kelleter 2014; McPherson 2007; see: Buonanno 2019 for a comprehensive review of this literature).

The legacy of serial form as liberatory, however, is obscured in some 21st century studies which have a tendency to denigrate the study of traditionally women-oriented genres such as the soap opera and the primetime serial (Buonanno 2016; Newman and Levine 2011). As broadcast television shapes the rhythms and actions of households through advertisement interruptions and the flow of programming it plays to a serial habitus, or an embodied rhythm that follows "surges" of reading or viewing with "interludes of discussion, contemplation and anticipation of the new" (Goodland 2013: 2). It is less established,

though, how changes in end-user consumption, from Netflix full-season releases to bingeing, necessarily shift the conceptions of televisual rhythms and their ties to the home and the ritualised act of viewing. Still, the serial form, Buonanno (2019: 198) argues, "is unique in creating - by way of regular, repeated, and enforced interruptions - the conditions for the constant interplay of the opposing desires to hasten and to delay reaching closure" evoking a sense of "I'd like to, but not yet." This suspension and ignition of desire remains in newer forms but has been displaced from the hands of programmers - in the form of DVD box sets, Video On Demand, and subscription streaming services- directly into those of the consumer.

Although this change does necessitate shifts in the viewer's methods of consumption, the "opposing desires" Buonanno unpacks continue to echo throughout the serial, often in ways that directly conjure feminised intergenerational tensions. This is not only true of the temporal patterns evoked in mother-daughter relationships but also in the sensation of television as that which complicates - through repetition - all that may at first appear to be new. In discussing the thorny problems of TV's endless flow and use of interruption for scholarship, John Caughie begins to define the spaces between cinema's "Symbolic father" and television's "mediating mother" (1991: 144, 152). Caughie argues that in the "everyday repetition of television - the routines of presentation, the everlasting serials, the standardisations of timeslot - difference has a short life." Thus, he posits:

> Any desire for an avant-garde negation has to be framed by that context: a context which invites a combination of modesty and cunning - the bouncing of complicity and difference, for example - rather than the heroic agonism of the historic avant-garde, or the desperate formalism of the once-and-for-all 'progressive' text (152).

The study of mothers and daughters has so captured attention in studies of television for, in part, the manner by which the dyad maps onto Caughie's bouncing between "modesty and cunning." Rather than a search for heroism or for competition - despite the "industry's propensity for claiming… the 'never before seen'" (Wheatley 2007: 4) - mother-daughter relationships reflect the paradigmatic anxieties of repetition and renewal that "continue to have a unique role to play in the contemporary portrayal and understanding of history and personal experience" (Creeber 2001: 453).

Thus, my reading of the temporal and spatial rhythms between mothers and daughters are carried out here not *despite* the shifts in televisual consumption but *in appreciation* of them. In her work on modern queer TV, Lynne Joyrich (2014: 136) describes television as offering "a model of proliferation—of multiplications, hybridizations, disseminations—beyond and besides teleological, Oedipal conceptions of a linear track from past to future." In this fashion, television - even in the era of its so-called and oft-predicted "death" - opens a series of questions regarding gender and time and the home that are, when removed from the "linear track," answered in kind by the multiplicative complications of the mother-daughter relationship. These complications arise in a cultural moment that remains preoccupied with TV's changes as representative of endings.[10] Television scholar Elana Levine questions whether the 21st century might even represent a "post-television" era, asking: "what is there to say about television as a cultural force, as a site for negotiations over power, when there is no one 'thing' we can call television?" (2011: 177).

Levine's question tidily sums up the obstacles presented by a seemingly-eternally fracturing and widening television landscape; its tenor also speaks to the knotted threads presented by intergenerational feminisms, particularly the anxieties presented by the act of "post-ing" feminism (McRobbie 2009).[11] In a moment where there appears to be as much worry over the end of unified TV as there is about the end of a unified Feminism and a sense of shared womanhood, there has been a rush to recategorise and redefine connections to domestic space. In this manner, we see the story of a "generational war" proliferated between second-wave baby boomers and later feminists that is characterised by disagreements over gender essentialism, appropriate approaches to sex, and the proper path of a unified Feminist movement (Duffy 2021). For what it is worth, though, Levine answers her own question without handwringing: "the plethora of new channels, and the fragmentation of viewers across them, may generate new research questions, but it does little to alter these fundamental workings of television culture, even in a postnetwork age" (2011:182).

[10] As a preoccupation, worries about the end of television are nothing new; see: Kermode (1966); Lotz (2014); Seitz (2019)

[11] Deeper discussion of "gender critical" intergenerational tensions are out of the scope of this discussion; however, I will note that the preoccupation of staunch, trans-exclusionary second-wave feminists appears to be: "What is there to say about women as a cultural force when there is no one "thing" we can call woman?"

Thus, tensions arise in full force at the confluence of television, the mother-daughter relationship, and fat, becoming particularly intense amongst the anxieties that have erupted at technological and sociocultural shifts. Perhaps the most obvious example of this intersection is the host of criticism paralleling the streaming-era boom of "binge" viewership and the dialogues about people who binge on food. Even before the age of Netflix, watching television was connected to fears about children's health and body size (Viner & Cole 2005; Proctor et al. 2003). More recently, watching television has been positioned quite specifically as an "obesity-related behaviour" that must be curbed at a population level (Biddle et al. 2017a, 2017b; Rosenkranz et al. 2010; Tahir et al. 2018). Eating *with* television, too, sparks particular concerns about domestic patterns and choices that may, together, produce "obesity" in families (Boulos et al. 2012). Since parents are the adults who shape "the environmental features of the young person's home pertaining to food, beverages, physical activity, and sedentary opportunities" - and since mothers are most often the parental figures connected to this kind of domestic leadership - these studies place the onus unwaveringly on "solving" "obesogenic" mothering (Proctor et al. 2003; Rosenkranz 2010: 478). Fat daughters present, by their appearance alone, an embodiment of a mother's failure; this is reflected in the obsession of "obesity" studies with early interventions in fat children (Bacon 2008) and an equal obsession in feminist studies of the body with tracing self-esteem and confidence behaviours between mothers and daughters (Boero 2009; Maor 2009; Orgad & Gill 2022; Parker 2014).[12] This onus is reinforced in segments like the earlier example from *The Doctors*, where Julie, with her sedentary household filled with sugary foods, is under scrutiny as a willing participant in her own child's (imagined) untimely death.

Narratives about fat women, then, are often at the same time made into narratives about mothers and daughters. The interruption of fat, for example, is clear in mother-daughter pairs' shared or broken relations with meal preparation and the dinner table. Some mothers reinforce dominant food ideologies. Mothers on television are often closely involved with their children's food - think of Carmela Soprano's kids feasting on eggplant parmesan and baked ziti in *The Sopranos* (HBO 1999 - 2007) or *Six Feet Under*'s (HBO 2001 - 2005) Ruth Fisher and her endless rotation of meals meant to drag her (adult) children

[12] Mother/daughter relationships open up questions about food readily - from breastfeeding (Wolf 2010) to the family dinner table.

back to the kitchen table - but fat adds to this dynamic a sense of unease that necessitates constant negotiation and anxious surveillance. In *Shrill*, Annie's mother Vera signs the pair up for a diet together; when Annie sighs and says she's starving in spite of the "snacks" allowed between meals, Vera boasts: "six almonds keep me full for hours!" ("Annie"). Other times, daughters hold fast to these ideologies even when their mothers disagree. In *Dietland*, Plum Kettle's mother - in contrast with Plum's friends who encourage her to continue dieting - begs her to start baking again *and* to actually eat the food she makes ("Y Not?"). In *This is Us,* mother Rebecca clashes with her daughter Kate's various diet plans at many points during the show. In both of these programmes, a fat daughter heavily considers weight loss surgery despite her thin mother's objections. The centre of aspiration may be slightly different, but all of these examples find mothers trying to shape their daughters around the issues of effort and desire; *Shrill*'s Vera wants to enable Annie to be the thin woman within, while the mothers in *Dietland* and *This is Us* are focused on helping their daughters find what Rebecca calls "a healthy balance" ("The Big Three").

There are many concepts across these relational studies that speak directly to one another: birth and death, gendered domesticity, overconsumption, and aspiration. The persistent anxiety around the time and space of serialized fiction - even though the serial's patterns are no longer enforced entirely by the structures of the broadcast schedule - is made distinct and intense between and through the fat-involved mother-daughter relationship. As the rhythms of earlier soap operas played out on traditional broadcast TV alongside the domestic rhythms of the "typical" housewife and mother, these newer instalments, too, in their brokenness, binge-ability, and association with "freedom" and "choice" reflect the pattern of its contemporaneous home: one where a feminine-centric domestic pattern may be categorised not so much by housework and flow, but more by the sustenance of multiple endeavours through fractured time in a neoliberal age (think: the multiple, casualised labours that represent a "gig economy" (Page-Tickell & Yerby 2020).

Indeed, as the cultural notion of the professional working mother as a superhero (who can "have it all") falls away, the idea of the "balanced woman" who can manage a suite of responsibilities across professional and domestic spheres is gaining ground (Rottenberg 2014). This perspective informs the ways in which the mothers and daughters in the coming examples live in fractured times, suspended across generations with very different (or, at

least, seemingly different) perspectives about women's moral bodies; and yet, within the alluring and coercive mantra of contemporary motherhood, existing spatial and temporal relations continue to trace a pattern of retreat and return that stretch back to some of the oldest patriarchal myths of motherhood (Young 2018).

Uncovering Patterns in Fat-Involved Mother-Daughter Relationships: Mama June and Honey Boo Boo

Mama June Shannon and her nicknamed children - Lauryn "Pumpkin," Jessica "Chubbs," Anna "Chickadee," and breakaway star Alana "Honey Boo Boo" - have been staples of the American reality TV landscape since an appearance on *Extreme Couponing* (TLC 2010-2012) led to their 2012 debut on *Toddlers & Tiaras* (TLC 2009 -2013), a reality show on which young girls compete in local beauty pageants to win tiny crowns, glittering sashes, and, sometimes, cash prizes. The family - based in small-town Georgia - drew viewers for their unapologetic and crass attitudes in front of the camera; then six years old, Alana was particularly famous for her seemingly improvisational quips, such as: "A dollar makes me holler!" or "Pretty comes in all different sizes, and my size is cute!" Shortly after their stint on *Tiaras*, the family was featured on their own reality show, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* (TLC 2012-2014). The show was cut short amidst a sex offender case against June's boyfriend at the time. The intervening years saw multiple appearances by the children and by June on shows like *Dr. Phil* and *The Doctors*, where the previously conflicting tone (encompassing entertainment and, at the same time, anxiety) around the family began to change to one that prioritised concern for their health and well-being. This tonal shift is reinforced by the series *Mama June: From Not to Hot* (WE TV 2017-2019), which documents June's weight loss surgery and recovery, her various eye surgeries, and the surrounding family dramas. In 2019, June and her boyfriend Geno were arrested and convicted of drug possession. Rather than cancelling the show, however, the next season simply took on a new moniker - *Mama June: Family Crisis* (WE TV 2020) - and followed the court proceedings and Alana's custody situation. Most recently, the show was rebranded again following June's 30-day rehabilitation programme as *Mama June: Road to Redemption* (WE TV 2021-). The tonal turning points between these varying iterations of

the family brand provide a location at which to analyse the narrative bonds and cyclical movements specific to fat-involved mother-daughter relationships.

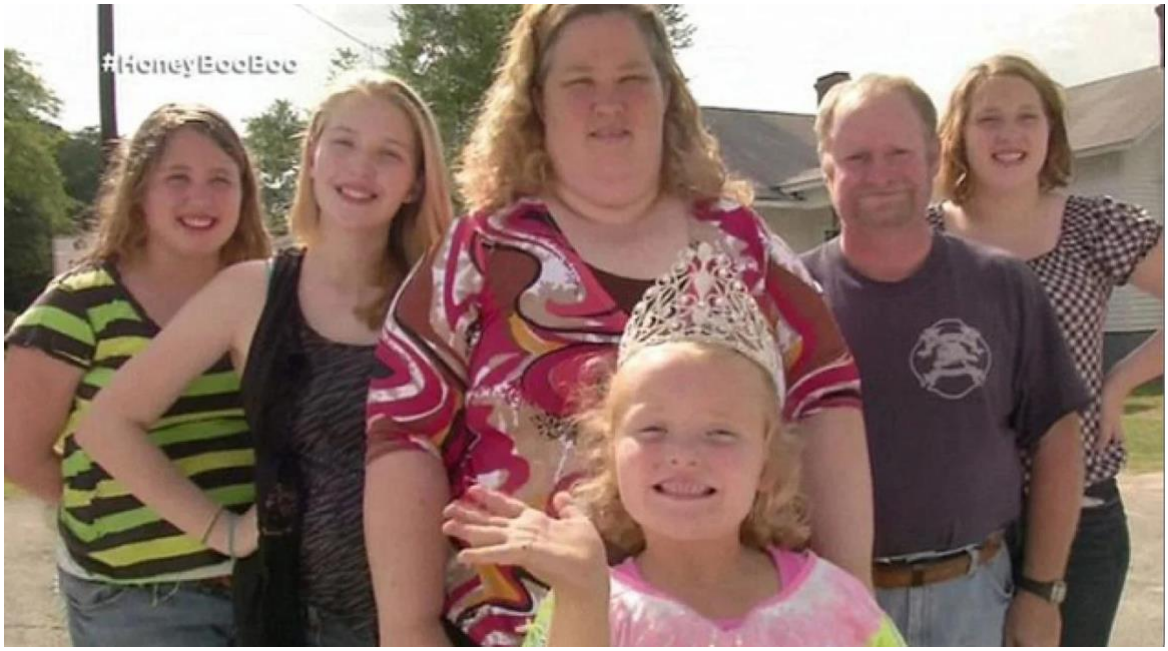


Figure 2-2 The Shannon Family: Mama June & Honey Boo Boo, centre (Entertainment Tonight 2014)

The last decade of Shannon-focused reality TV has only further cemented what was already clear in the early days of *Toddlers & Tiaras:* Mama June broadly qualifies as a "bad mother." From providing Alana with a caffeinated pre-pageant cocktail of Mountain Dew and Red Bull ("Go-Go Juice") and microwaved spaghetti dressed in ketchup ("Sketti"), to attempting to cover up sexual abuse perpetrated on her daughter Chickadee by her former partner, to (years later) spending thousands of dollars a day on meth and losing custody of Honey Boo Boo, Mama June is clearly meant to be received as a morally reprehensible figure (Swantek & Wood 2017; Yahr 2014).[13] She aligns with the traditional - and "freakish" - narratives of fatness that are inextricably bound up with issues of "goodness" and proper biocitizenship (Kinnick 2009: 3; Feasey 2012). The framing of Mama June as an explicitly bad mom is consistent with the mother as a "ready-made monster," her fat body "held up in popular and medical cultures" as a cautionary tale "to help *scare* good girls and boys into normalcy" (Ettinger 2014: 128; Owen 2015: 3).

[13] These events have been written up in various tabloids and listicles but have not been covered in particular depth in academic study.

This is, in part, related to the editing style of reality TV which most typically "casts mothers into roles that are at best interfering and at worst evil" (Dejmanee 2015: 466). June floats between these subject positions, but this is complicated. In the early days of the reality empire, for example, she supports her large family by cleverly making use of limited resources. June has a deal with local law enforcement, for example, to give her first right of refusal for any edible roadkill found in the area. An avid coupon collector, she stocks the house with anything she can purchase with coupons or otherwise obtain inexpensively in order to teach her children "the value of a dollar."

Toddlers & Tiaras regularly plays with the contrasts between contestant's homes - many of whom live in deprived areas - and their bright eyed, hyper-feminine pageant looks. Establishing footage of the Thompson's hometown of McIntyre, Georgia shows a beige grain tower, a parked pick-up truck and a railway crossing sign; panning from a freight train passing through their yard, we are introduced to Mama June and Alana's home. The family home from here is presented as a testament to lower-class excess; the Thompsons literally live on the "wrong side" of the tracks. The living room is filled with stacks upon stacks of chocolate Pop-Tarts and ceiling-high shelves crammed to bursting with bulk rolls of toilet paper, jars of mustard, and a variety of colourful dollar store treats. There are so many bulk items that one early bit of footage shows Honey Boo Boo and Mama June having a seemingly endless "snowball fight" with bulk packages of toilet and kitchen roll.

In one episode, while preparing for Honey Boo Boo's second-ever pageant ("Storybook Pageant: Diamonds") – her first "big pageant" called "Georgia's Most Beautiful Girls" – Mama June takes the family to a muddy section of their garden for a "redneck facial." Eyeing the camera with twinkling eyes, Honey Boo Boo smears grey-brown mud from sloppy puddles all over her face. Highlighting Mama June's resourcefulness, we turn shortly after to another pageant mother trying to subject her five-year-old daughter to semi-permanent eyelashes in a salon. The difference is stark, contrasting with the grime and grit of Honey Boo Boo's dirt-covered face. However, the salon operation ends in tears and frustration as the little girl's eye is glued shut with eyelash adhesive. Meanwhile Honey Boo Boo and Mama June's adventure leads to a joyful evening preparing roadkill for dinner with the family.

In his analysis of reality dating programmes, however, Jonathan Gray (2008) argues that the performativity and unruliness associated with women alters "expected and traditional" behaviours in such a way as to "open up room for subversion of gender expectations" (275). From this perspective, Mama June's routine moral failings could be seen as a radical subversion of expectations of femininity and motherhood. This, too, is embedded in the poetics of reality TV. Quick cuts, humorous sound effects, and dramatic notes are added to emphasise and exaggerate the interplay of class and fat across a number of scenes to comical effect. In *Toddlers and Tiaras,* short, sharp images of Alana's hyperactive dancing and joyful facial expressions slide across the frame in a series of screen wipes while crash and whip zooms heighten the tensions of (otherwise quite insignificant) issues like a girl's father bringing the wrong hairspray to a pageant or to a wailing child lamenting last-minute lost denture glue. Alana and Mama June are thrown into the show chaotically, with the camera often following Alana's silly gestures and erratic movements and playing the audio of the interview crew's giggles throughout her confessionals. Comparing the Thompson women to the more dramatic and seemingly serious families, the show can be seen as representing a fun and exciting opposition to "proper" motherhood. However, as Alana gets older and the stakes become higher for personal drama to take precedence in the Thompson's own reality shows - *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, and the ensuing Mama June-focused trilogy - the tone becomes much less light-hearted and chaotic and much more uncomfortable and even more "dirty," to borrow from Amy West's (2011) interrogation of reality TV. As this shift takes place, the opposition to femininity begins to shift from radical to exposing.

The Power of Dirt

"The [ideological] power of dirt," as West sees it, "is the power to disrupt, to obfuscate rather than clarify meaning; it is the scandalous, rebellious power of simply making a mess" (2011: 66). Reality television is, itself, often obsessed with dirt; dirt, mess, and gore are obsessively explored as much in home-organisation and "extreme cleaning" shows as in "forensic" makeover shows. However, thinking through the connective tissue of dirt with television and hierarchies of taste ("trashy" TV), West argues that dirt is not only a category in and of itself but also an "ongoing, emergent, and dynamic state of disruption between categories" (2011: 66). The dirt in - and dirtiness of - the Thompson family sagas

are not defined entirely by material uncleanliness, although they often are. Alana's "redneck facial," for instance, while it literally takes place in a patch of mud, is at once a moment of dirty, gross, sweaty action and one of connection between mother and daughter. Through play and silliness, June and Alana prepare together to participate in a rite of womanhood - insomuch as a child beauty pageant is a choreographed performance of femininity; in their insistent but playful connection to the earth, the power of dirt here serves to elevate mother and daughter to a place of subversion.

The dirt in *Toddlers & Tiaras,* beyond disgusting globs of sticky glue on eyelashes and smeared Vaseline on teeth, plays out acutely at the level of metaphor, as in the disruptions between girlhood and womanhood. Perhaps obviously, the show has come under critical fire by American conservatives for its depiction of young girls dressed in mature outfits or dancing to sexually explicit music; arguably most famously, the ultra-conservative watchdog group Parents Television Council stirred public anger over three-year-old Paisley Dickey's costume (04x12) designed by her mother and modelled on the scant outfit worn by Julia Roberts' prostitute character in *Pretty Woman* (1990) (ABC News 2011).[14] The fury over this mother's judgement in creating a *Pretty Woman* costume is further evidence of the way in which television systematically attacks the mother–daughter dyad and "dismiss[es] the role of the mother," as Tisha Dejmanee argues (2015: 471). As this occurs in television and popular culture, she continues, the "media are able to take [the mother's] place in providing an instructive and authoritative voice for how young girls should perform femininity" (2015: 471). In this case, femininity is that which must be mediated across stages of (im)maturity at the dangerous cost of appearing preternaturally sexual: potential abuse. This is not to argue that it is necessarily "good" for a toddler to dress as a famous prostitute character, but rather to elucidate the engine that powers dirt both within and beyond the material. Through the conduit of the trashy show, the exhilaration of a "moral contagion" spreads, carrying with it as metaphor and matter the "strong and apparently 'natural reaction' of disgust" provoked by trashiness (Campkin & Cox 2007: 5).

[14] The event prompted ABC personality Sherri Shepherd to rant: "When are we going to stop sexualizing our children? Your job is to protect your child … if you don't think paedophiles are watching this show, I have a bridge I want to sell you" (ABC News 2011).

Over its repetition and across comparative iterations, the mother-daughter relationship - wrapped up in the many pitfalls and problems of appropriate femininity and complicated by an "ongoing" state of disruption - easily produces a squalor outside its own. Thinking through the "power" of dirt, West suggests that filth typifies "a cultural location at which the human body, social hierarchy, psychological subjectivity and material objects converge" (Cohen 2005: viii, qtd. in West 2011: 75). The *Pretty Woman* conflict begins at the dynamic convergence of the young girl's asexual body, her mother's supposed idiocy, the (perceived) low class status of child pageantry, wider anxieties of appropriate sexuality and mothering, and a poor approximation of Julia Roberts' diamond top, mini skirt, blonde wig, and thigh-high boots; in the trashy, boundless space of television, the power of dirt here is its ability to confuse and muddle the material realities of bodies with culturally-specific metaphors of morality and cleanliness. Although these programmes may purport to support some other manner of being - dirty, unruly, crass - that subversion of femininity is undercut by the maternal, instructive voice and rhythms of television.

For the Shannon family, pedagogical convergences of the gross, sticky, crusty fat body with classed and gendered ideals are countless; dirt is the lifeblood of the reality television empire and Mama June's fat body - and to a lesser extent, her children's bodies - present seemingly boundless opportunities to revel in the muck (West 2011: 77). *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* relies on domestic abjection and disgust: Mama June lets out an audible fart while posing with the family for promo shots; Mama June hides her mangled "forklift foot" from the pedicurist; Honey Boo Boo blows her nose into a cloth napkin at an etiquette lesson; Mama June has unidentified crust forming between the rolls of her neck fat. Honey Boo Boo often rolls up her t-shirt and squishes her chubby belly as if it is speaking to the camera. In one particularly memorable episode of *HCHBB*, the family briefly adopts a teacup pig named Glitzy; although he is supposed to act as Alana's mascot and friend at pageant events (her "gay pageant pig"), he instead squeals all night, runs rampant through the house, and defecates on the kitchen table. The latter act prompts Chubbs to joke: "It looks like chocolate éclairs … Mama might wanna eat them!" Later in the show, Pumpkin comes out to June as bisexual; while commenting on her "positive" feelings about it - "if she's with a girl, I don't have to worry about her getting pregnant" - June works at unclogging the tip of a plastic bottle of honey. Succeeding, she tilts her head back, thrusts out her tongue, and

squeezes the bottle into her mouth as her partner Sugar Bear looks on. The camera zooms in close on the lower half of June's face. "Ew," Sugar Bear utters as he and the audience watch honey stream down over her tongue, "that looks nasty."

In the transition to the suite of Mama June-focused shows, through which the family's popularity is sustained, the aesthetics of the shows take on the addition of more recursive and institutional dirt. In a 2018 appearance on *The Doctors* - the health-focused show from the first example - Honey Boo Boo and Mama June are held up together and measured against acceptable standards ("Too Real for Reality: The Doctors Get Real with Reality Stars"). Their eating is portrayed not as humorous, but as destructive, unhealthy, and improper. Host Travis Stork asks June about her worries for Alana's health as the scene cuts away to Alana in the confessional booth, listing off her "favourite foods." Flipping between Mama June's assertions that her paediatrician is not concerned about the family's eating habits, Alana delivers lines in her trademark style: "I like chicken nuggets. I like to dip it in, normally, honey mustard. Some mayonnaise. Ketchup, maybe. Some barbecue sauce." The show bequeaths the family with a set of new kitchen appliances and six-weeks of chef-prepared meals. However, when they revisit the family home months later, the *Doctors* team finds uneaten meals, unopened appliances, and boxes of sugary soda on the counter. The audience boos Mama June as the doctors re-emphasise their fears for Alana's health. From this point forward, medical institutions become a fixture of representations of the Shannon family: in *Not to Hot*, Mama June opts for bariatric surgery; the family holds conversations about June's actions with TV therapist Dr. Ish in *Family in Crisis;* and, a central concern in the 2021 season of *Road to Redemption* is a now-teenage Honey Boo-Boo's diabetes results. Positioned through a focus on health, Mama June and Honey Boo Boo become the representatives of national failure on many fronts.

The institutional dirt of the family's medical state, then, is further paired against a stereotypical imitation of Black daytime TV characters, in particular the "sassy Black woman" and the "mammy" (Cooper 2018). These archetypes are medicalised and, as Collins (2004) describes, de-eroticised as "no reasonable white man would choose" a "dark-skinned… obese, sometimes morbidly overweight" woman for a partner. This is not a new trend in the Shannon family, but rather one that has been present in the family's voice from the early days of filming. Willa Paskin noted of *HCHBB* at the time of its airing that the

show depicted "the unpredictable, viral progression of television itself" (2012). To Paskin, Honey Boo Boo's patterns of speech and "sassy" punchlines were "[American syndicated tabloid talk show] *The Jerry Springer Show* (1991-2018) ingested, assimilated and then passed on to a small child, who is now performing some version of it on her very own reality TV show, without any awareness of its source or racial implications."

That digested and regurgitated mimicry has served over time to enhance, as Rachel Sanders argues of the Mama June series, the show's "cautionary message to its large (two to three million weekly) and largely white audiences" that obesity is merely a "trait of inappropriate whiteness" (2019: 292). Mama June and Honey Boo Boo, taking up the screen with their large and uncontainable bodies and loudly proclaiming their thoughts in affected accents, "threaten the superiority and invisibility" of whiteness (Sanders 2019: 292). This threat is compounded by their health issues, which resonate with the erroneous concerns so often placed upon Black women as "social dead weight" with "deadly" bodies more prone to diabetes and heart disease and more likely to eat badly than white women (Pickett & Platenburg 2021; McMillan-Cottom 2019; Strings 2019). Thus, the most recent project has been to reclaim their narrative pattern, re-situating the family in a more appropriate and likeable - a more appropriately white - context.

Pattern of Retreat and Return

"She always says she cares most about her family, but she doesn't." These words, uttered through Honey Boo Boo's tears, echo as the central theme of an episode of *From Not to Hot* ("The Intervention") which revolves around an intervention that marks a supposed turning point for the family. It is here - seated in a semi-circle in their sister Pumpkin's living room - that the children beg their mother to attend a rehabilitation centre for her cocaine and meth usage after a series of (well-documented) medical and personal crises. An intensely personal moment, this tragic moment of separation marks both the dramatic end to the third series and the start of yet another shift in the family brand, moving the Shannons from *Not to Hot* to *Family Crisis* and, soon, to *Road to Redemption.*

The difficulty of mapping personal experiences onto narrative rhythms emerges in these shifts, marked by the almost frantic re-titling(s) and bids at making sense of the family chaos. In these later iterations, the storylines jump around wildly from separation to return,

attempting to map onto the actual family's lives. In some episodes, June and Honey Boo Boo are distanced as a result of June's shortcomings. Episodes focus on custody battles, on therapy sessions, and on family arguments. *Family Crisis* and *Road to Redemption* finds Alana in Pumpkin's custody, with June nowhere to be found for long stretches of time. When June returns, the distance is palpable. The sisters hover around the couch while June sits at the kitchen table. In their therapy sessions, however, June refuses to admit to any wrongdoing - the sisters sit together, and she sits apart. Between these separation stories, though, are narrative lines intended to show reconciliation and "redemption." Honey Boo Boo acts as June's pageant coach, reversing their roles in a supposedly tender approach. In interviews, Pumpkin, Honey Boo Boo, and June sit close together, describing the changes in June's demeanour ("she never used to say 'I love you'… But now she says it every time we're on the phone" (Entertainment Tonight 2021).

Recently, an article appeared in *Teen Vogue* with a clear treatise: *"*Alana Thompson is no longer the rambunctious child beauty queen the world knew as Honey Boo Boo. And she'd like you to use her real name." (Stauffer 2021). The photo spread fits Alana in 2020s vogue, contrasting with the clothes she wears to the interview (an oversized t-shirt and spandex bike shorts): a lime green suit jacket-dress ornamented with a beige cowboy hat and two-tone tights, a floaty and romantic pink chiffon dress, an enormous bright green tent-dress. In the *Teen Vogue* interview, Alana's character is redeemed while her mother's is again denigrated. Her dreams of becoming a nurse and of escaping from the family business of reality television, married with high fashion outfits and gentle questioning ("do you have a boyfriend?" "will you go to university?") serve as attempts to recentre her fatness as stemming from trauma rather than from moral failing. The article also takes lengths to reposition her Black mimicry as simply a matter of cultural commentary. Thus, in extricating Alana from her mother's wrongdoings and from her complicated involvement with classed and raced perspectives, the narrative pattern suggests Alana's liberation by separation. Still,

in 2021, Alana and Mama June appear onscreen closer together than ever before: hidden inside an enormous beach ball in their performance on *The Masked Singer* (2019-).

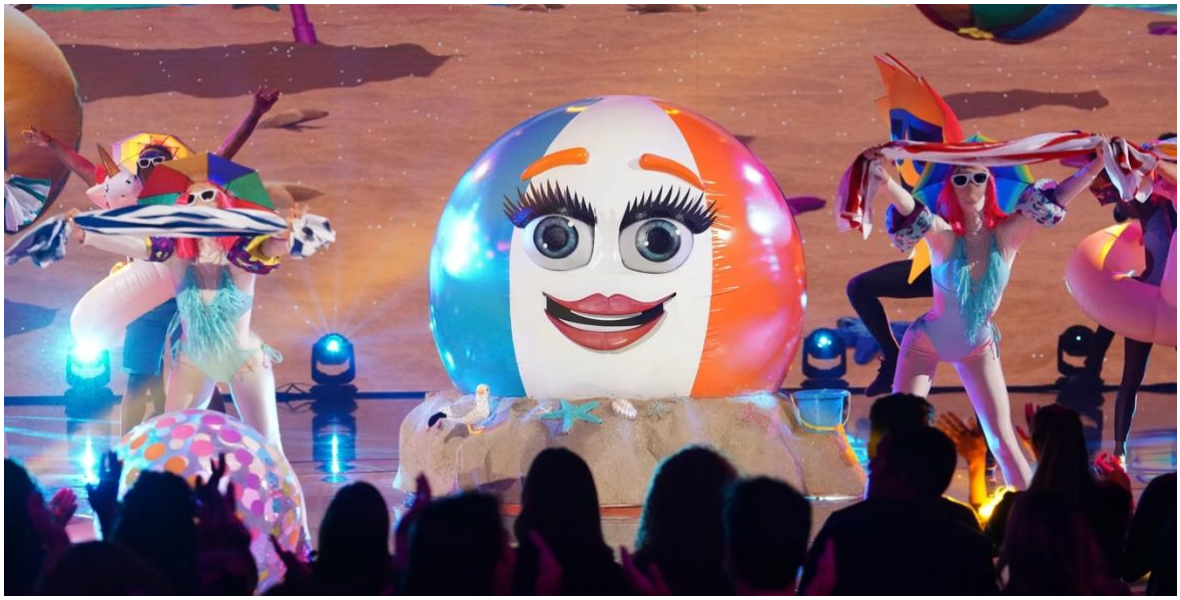


Figure 2-3 Mama June and Honey Boo Boo perform together from inside a large beach ball on *The Masked Singer*

Uncovering Patterns in Fat-Involved Mother-Daughter Relationships: Rebecca and Kate Pearson, *This is Us*

We open on a busy morning in the Pearson household ("The Big Three"); mother Rebecca whisks around the family kitchen, preparing three near-identical school lunches (one containing a banana) alongside a table already set for breakfast. The year is 1988 and the kitchen is appropriately full of nostalgic items, including a broad array of colourful refrigerator magnets, a Crockpot and a set of orange Tupperware. The camera lingers over these more mundane pieces of kitchenware before landing on a wildly colourful and brightly illustrated box of children's cereal perched on the dining table: PAC-MAN, Crunchy Sweetened Corn Cereal with Marshmallow Bits. Three eight-year olds come bounding into the kitchen - Randall, Kevin, and finally Kate. While her skinny prepubescent brothers wear effortlessly simple t-shirts and jeans, Kate is soft, chubby and donned in layers upon layers of muted, beige-toned clothing - a shirt under a shirt under a vest - designed to camouflage her protruding belly. The boys, caught up in a fight, plop down at the table and start tearing

into their cereal. As Kate approaches, however, she sighs dramatically, her body recoiling with a knowing disgust and exasperation.

The camera slides back over the garish cereal box and family-sized carton of milk to reveal not a third colourful cereal bowl but a cantaloupe half, stuffed with a palmful of cottage cheese. Kate makes a break for the refrigerator, but Rebecca quickly shuffles her back to the diet food breakfast. Tapping her spoon dully on the surface of the cantaloupe, Kate's head hangs low, mouth turned down in a disappointed silence against the lively chatter of her brothers' argument. Still, she beams when her father enters the room. It is even more gratifying when Jack grimaces alongside her. He utters a succinct "yuck," before dumping a helping of "Fruit-Flavoured O's" over the top of the health food concoction. Smiling triumphantly against her mother's exasperation, Kate picks the cereal off the top with her fingers. She holds the tiny O up with delight, before tossing it into her mouth. "Kate," Rebecca sighs in defeat, her back turned as she continues to tidy up, "[eat] all the fruit please."

This flashback sequence, from the second episode of NBC's *This is Us* (2016 - 2022), introduces viewers to what critic Evette Dionne succinctly brushes off as a "classic fat girl story," in which a loving, thin mother tries to protect her fat daughter from fatphobia by "forcing her to hide her body, shrink her being, and make her conscious of the amount of space she takes up in the world" (Dionne 2017). This fraught, weight-centric dynamic between Rebecca Pearson (Mandy Moore) and her fat daughter Kate (Chrissie Metz) has remained a central theme of the show over seven years and six seasons. Although the early narratives about Rebecca and Kate focus on these smaller domestic squabbles and their repercussions - just after the cantaloupe scene, we flash forward to Kate ignoring her mother's phone call while working out at the gym - later episodes continue to complicate their narrative; through the show's extensive layering of time and interweaving of serial plot, Rebecca and Kate's relationship comes to reflect the pattern of retreat and return in intimate and excessive ways. Additionally, Kate's fatness produces challenges to the cyclical flow of television which emerge as her fat body interrupts and disrupts the dynamic flow of her relationship to Rebecca.

This is Us is an American primetime serial following the Pittsburgh-based Pearson family across multiple generations. The central ensemble cast revolves outward from

parents Jack (Milo Ventimiglia) and Rebecca (Mandy Moore) and their triplets, known affectionately as "The Big Three": Hollywood television actor Kevin (Justin Hartley), fat singer and personal assistant Kate (Chrissie Metz), and their adopted Black brother, a successful "weather trader," Randall (Sterling K. Brown). The show relies on an intricate web of flashbacks and flashforwards that alter the narrative of the present and complicate existing storylines. Stretching as far back as the early 1900s and as far forward as the 2040s, the show follows the Pearsons through an intricate and sweeping cross-generational narrative which, by the final season, builds a number of co-existing timelines using a range of performers from young recurring casts (playing the triplets at 2, 5, 10 and 17 years old) as well as main cast actors in old-age makeup. Because of her presence throughout most of the show's timeline - as opposed to Jack, who dies in a housefire when the kids are in high school - Rebecca is situated quite clearly as the matriarch of the family; however, there is no single protagonist. Rather, as is common to soap operas and primetime serials, *This is Us* is comprised of an ensemble cast. Alongside the Pearson family are The Big Three's extended family, significant others, children, colleagues, and friends, many of whom prove integral to - or become pivotal in - various plotlines. Still, these plots tend to inform immediate family members' characters.

Excess is an inextricable part of *This is Us* on both sides of the camera. The show is often dreamy and gentle, primarily underscored by acoustic folk ballads (Sufjan Stevens, Nick Drake, Paul Simon, Jackson C. Frank, Bob Dylan) alongside well-known Billboard favourites (Joni Mitchell's "Both Sides Now," The Rolling Stones' "You Can't Always Get What You Want," Hanson's "MMMBop") to create an effect of relatability and nostalgia. NBC's promotional material describes the show as a "grounded, life-affirming dramedy" which "reveals how the tiniest events in our lives impact who we become, and how the connections we share with each other can transcend time, distance, and even death" (NBC 2016). Critic Bonnie Stiernberg describes *This is Us* as "peak TV comfort food… a simple, mushy family drama you can flick on for maximum waterworks" (2017). Crying while watching *This is Us* is recognised in Twitter accounts, meme posts, critical work, jokes from

celebrities, and references in contemporary TV (such as *Jane the Virgin* (The CW 2014-2019) in "Chapter Eighty-Nine") as a universal experience for viewers.[15]

In all its heightened emotionality and excess, *This is Us* works to model the Pearsons as a "great American" family. Like many soap operas and primetime serials before it, the programme is enabled by its traditional weekly schedule and long seasons - each comprising of eighteen 43-minute episodes each - to comment on the most popular American issues of the moment. *This is Us* is a palatably political show that takes a liberal stance that flirts with, but does not explicitly handle, rising tensions in contemporary American society. The show depicts, to name a few subject areas: racism, sexism, workplace discrimination, addiction (alcohol, heroine, opioids), disordered eating (anorexia, bulimia, binge-eating), ill health, dementia, abuse, grief, poverty, adoption, queerness, depression, and anxiety.[16] These broad themes are worked through intimate engagement with an expandingly diverse set of family members, each of whom appears to stand in for some much larger identity category; in this way, the show attempts to teach a moral lesson in each episode and across each season.

However pedagogical, though, the integration of social issues continues to function primarily through (and as a backdrop to) the personal and intimate dramas in individual relationships. The formal devices with which TV serials like *This is Us* create moral meaning are, as Creeber (2001) describes, not as focused on depicting reality as they are on escalating the seriousness of "every individual and personal action;" as a result, "no matter how small or trivial [they] may seem at the time," any one choice or behaviour can spin outward, creating a web of consequences that, in the narrative, appear to reveal hidden truths and meanings about characters and their lives (453). As the show increasingly narrows the focus

[15] Crying while watching *This is Us* is recognised in social media discourse, memes, and references in contemporary TV (such as *Jane the Virgin* (2014-2019)"Chapter Eighty-Nine") as a universal experience. The 2019 Emmys opened with a laughing plea from actor Bryan Cranston for the show to "stop making us cry!" and a tongue-in-cheek promotional video for *Entertainment Weekly* saw the cast apologising to its audience for "lots and lots of tears" only to then deliver an emotional monologue typical of the show.

[16] This is further enhanced by the "liveness" of the show. The fifth season, delayed by and then released amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, takes an even more blatantly pedagogical responsibility than previous seasons in specifically addressing mask-wearing policies, vaccine acceptance, and, like many other weekly programmes released during this time, the 2020 murder of George Floyd and ensuing Black Lives Matter protests.

on characters' respective identities with each passing season, it constructs identities with a tacit proposition of Jack and Rebecca - two middle-class, fit, white Baby Boomers in a suburban two-storey home - as the baseline against which previous and ensuing generations are categorised and defined. Their experiences, choices, actions, and patterns are the ones by which each child is measured. The show - regardless of its intentions - positions the family and their history and memory as one that explodes outward from "normal" parents with "traditional" American roots. As a result, *This is Us* regularly brings benign daily life experiences into the frame in order to deconstruct their relation to these traditional values and to shifting views over time. Fatness, here, is carried forward through a series of microaggressions held in gendered norms; Kate and Rebecca's relationship is grounded in the tensions of shared womanhood, made abundantly clear in the cyclical rhythms of their literal separation and physical closeness.

Gendered Bodies and Vulnerable Spaces

The show, then, represents Kate's fat body as both an intimate and personal experience *and* as a consequence of Rebecca's (and, to a lesser extent, Jack's) parenting. The construction of fat in the Pearson family is intricately interwoven with the construction of gender over time. In their youths, Jack is "in charge" of the boys' bodies: their fitness, their strength, their abilities. He takes them camping and shows them how to clear gutters and fix the family car; he teaches Randall how to run off his anxieties and trains Kevin to lift weights in the garage. Notably, these masculine-aligned responsibilities eventually become fraught for both Randall and Kevin over time. These traditionally masculine coping mechanisms fail when positioned against emotional and physical needs; running is not a holistic response to Randall's anxiety and weight-lifting alone in the garage proves dangerous for Kevin ("Changes"). Jack's gendered lessons about masculinity reflect his own unchecked issues with addiction, emotional avoidance, and fear. As the Pearson sons' bodies (and failures) fall under Jack's jurisdiction, management of - and attention to - Kate's body falls to Rebecca.

As a young mother in the 1980s and 90s, Rebecca's dilemma exists at the tension between her domestic role/responsibilities and her career/personal desires. As her children grow older, she attempts a return to the pursuit of her singing career ("Pilgrim Rick"). This is much to the chagrin of her husband, who would prefer a kiss at the door and warm dinner

on the table when he returns from his menial day job. Rebecca's dreams are short-lived, as Jack begins drinking heavily and avoiding his familial duties; he sabotages her singing career, attacking the male manager of her band in a jealous, drunken rage. Rebecca must then make a "choice" between her responsibilities as a mother and her talents as a singer; this choice, obviously, is not so much a decision as a necessity. She returns to the home full time, no longer a performer and working woman but a *performer of* "woman's work;" she becomes the "unhappy housewife" trying to uphold an image of happiness and wellbeing (Genz 2009: 110). It is within this domestic rhythm that Kate and Rebecca's difficulties are enhanced.

The gendered divide in parentage is nearly always at play in depictions of fat daughters, whose failed bodies stand as their mother's active failures. Fathers of fat daughters are typically only passively involved with their daughters' large bodies and are often missing or absent from the narrative entirely (Farrell 2015: 107). When they are present, as they are exempt from the responsibilities placed on mothering, fathers of fat daughters act as companions. While the fat daughter can turn to her father for love, touch, and appreciation, her mother must be controlled, measured, and organised. In rebellion against this sense of control, daughters and fathers are often shown eating together, usually indulging in foods that are "forbidden" by the mother. Young Kate and her dad have a number of secret food rituals that form a powerful part of their bond; this relationship to food is later portrayed as one addict (Jack is addicted to alcohol) enabling another addict's behaviour as a misguided show of love. This tension provides the fodder for much of the early seasons of the show. In the second season, Rebecca attempts to keep Jack from taking their daughter "back to that ice cream place" during a family vacation, as she is worried about how "obsessed" Kate is with food ("The Fifth Wheel"). Jack begrudgingly agrees to give his daughter a day of fun outdoor exercise instead, but when the endeavour fails to make her happy, he takes her out for ice cream anyway, provoking Rebecca's fury. In response, he and Rebecca have a hushed fight about their relationships to Kate. "I did not want to be one of those women," she says, in a tone reminiscent of Stella Dallas "whose sole purpose was to be a mother."

A similar dynamic is evoked in *Shrill* - a Hulu show following the life of fat Portland native Annie (Aidy Bryant) - when Annie and her dad covertly celebrate his cancer remission

by sharing meatball sub sandwiches, a tradition of theirs. When her mother realises they have broken the strictly-managed health food diet she has designed for him, she is furious and insists Annie leave her home. Annie and her mother's relationship around food is fraught throughout the show's run, coming to the fore as they attempt to reconnect and spend time together. One of the effects of her mother's tight grip on control is the overwhelming sense that Annie's fat body is then haunted by their difficult history with food and diet. As the cycling of mother-daughter rupture, separation, and re-initiation in fat-involved relationships occurs across multiple episodes of a show, that haunting effect is reinforced through lived realities of the body. In *Shrill*, fat acts as a visual signifier of the passage of time as well as of the passage of trauma and conflict; made quite literal by the hyper(in)visibility of the large body, these cycles create a particularly defensive effect that, perhaps despite intentions, reinforce fatness as a kind of helpless and defiant truth handed down through generations.

This becomes evident, for example, in the rhythms produced by the semi-regular hyper-emotional monologue, a staple of TV across genres. In reality television, the monologue takes the form of the confessional, where characters - mostly filmed at a later date - reveal their true feelings and add nuance and drama to ensuing scenes (Aslama & Pantti 2006). The confessional here institutes a pause or break from the overarching narrative in order to produce intimate revelations and to complicate existing storylines. Like the confessional, *Shrill* and *This is Us* employ the monologue as a space for characters to briefly emerge from a narrative through-line in a way meant to evoke authenticity and elicit raw emotion. In the first season of *Shrill* ("Pool"), Annie monologues to her friends after experiencing workplace fatphobia: "I could be a f—ing nutritionist, since I have literally been training for it since the fourth grade - which is the first time that my mom said that I should just eat a bowl of Special K and not the dinner that she made for everyone else … so I might be a little bit smaller." Initially positioning her mother as the villain, Annie quickly comes around to a more general statement about anti-fat bias and constructions of women, stating, "Honestly, I don't even blame her, because it's a f—ing mind prison, you know? That every woman everywhere has been programmed to believe." Fat - as Annie is gesturing toward - is a component in ideological notions of what the "healthy" American family should resemble, and in particular of what a healthy woman should look like; or, at least, fat is a reminder of what a woman *should be made* to look like (by her mother, ostensibly).

The "issue" of the gendered body is, then, at the forefront of discussion at all times. In *This is Us*, these tensions between mother and daughter are further articulated in representations of bodily separation and physical closeness. In the early seasons, when confronted with Kate's excessive body, Rebecca seems unable to fully recognise herself within her daughter. Kate, in regarding or getting close to her mother, seems to take away only the shame of past disagreements and pains. Normally the two occupy entirely different sides of the room from one another or are otherwise separated. This is often made explicit, as when Kate explains the dynamic with Rebecca to her husband; she fears the criticisms her mother will dole out after looking her "up and down like she's fitting [her] for a bra" ("A Manny-Splendored Thing"). The very choice of the bra metaphor suggests Kate's deep discomfort with closeness and touch as well as a significant feeling of her body being exposed before her mother's eye. Kate fears disappointing her mother more than she feels she already has (because of her excessive and imperfect body) and so she keeps herself distant. They are so unnerved around one another that when Rebecca sits, Kate stands. When Kate comes near, Rebecca shifts away. They circle one another, not quite close but not quite separated. When Kate and Rebecca do touch or hug one another, it is typically in the context of extreme circumstance.

The show suggests this process of revolving around one another is nothing new; the opening scene of "Number Two" is told through intimate footage of baby Kate, crying and wiggling away from her mother's grasp as she takes her first steps. The rest of the episode, in tone with this home video-style memory, follows the story of Kate's pregnancy and subsequent miscarriage, framing her loss through the relationship with her own mother. In the present day, Kate attempts to cope with her immediate grief. She fights with her partner, attempts to distract herself with work, and eventually turns to food, all while ignoring Rebecca's repeated calls. Meanwhile, in flashback, we find the early tensions embedded in Kate and Rebecca's relationship. Their fighting in the past culminates in an emotional monologue from Rebecca to her teen daughter:

> I have always wanted to have a daughter because I wanted to do it a different way. I wanted to be the mom that had her arms wide open, just waiting for you to fall in if you needed it (…) And if you do, I'll love you.

> And if you don't, I'll love you too. Because that's what it means to be a parent. You'll see one day.

The episode may centre on their argument and difficulty, but Kate's miscarriage and her mother's shared experience of child loss provide an avenue toward a form of bodily reconciliation between mother and daughter. In the present day, Rebecca finally appears, uninvited, at Kate's door. For the first time in the show, the two share an uncomplicated closeness as Kate falls, weeping, into her mother's arms.

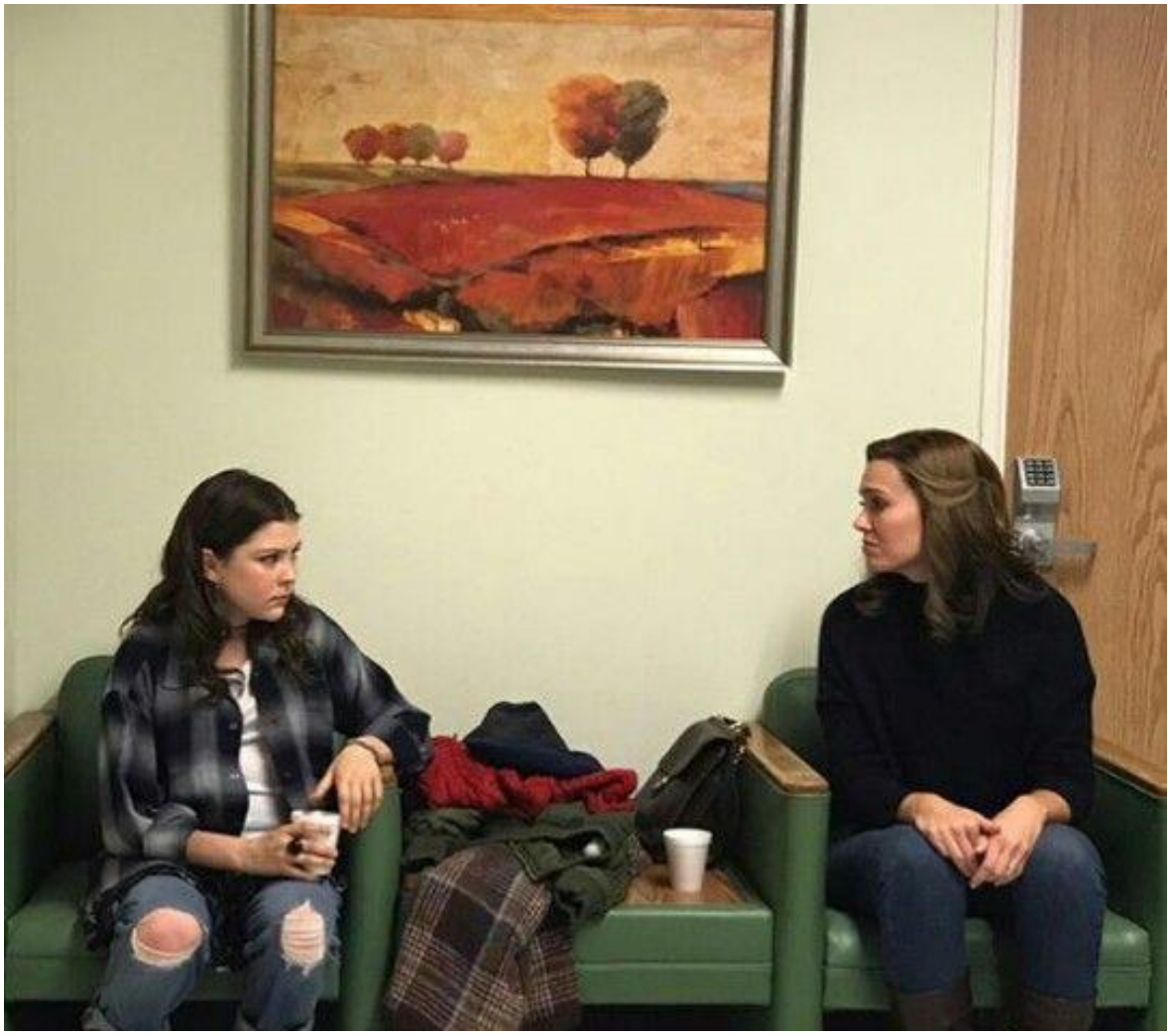


Figure 2-4 Young Kate and Rebecca, divided as Rebecca delivers a monologue

Figure 2-5 Rebecca hugs Kate after her miscarriage

This is Us opens questions of rhythm and flow between a fat daughter and her thin mother, illuminating the ways in which fatness is (and often, is not) rooted in family structures and domestic spaces. Kate's fraught relationship with Rebecca, reflects the pattern of retreat and return that is so often fundamental to mother/daughter relationships and relies on a fairly standard neoliberal narrative of (a lack of) personal progression; however, Kate's fatness produces challenges to the cyclical flow of television and the traditional rhythms of the primetime serial. These challenges emerge as her fat body disrupts the dynamic flow of the maternal relationship, spurred on by the interruptions to time and space that Kate produces in opposition to her mother. And yet, it is in these very conditions that Kate and Rebecca's relationship emerges as something more than simply that of two women. Instead it is an expression of white, upwardly mobile, ambitious, neoliberal generational tensions. They are the same, but they are not. They are close, and yet they are distant.

Yet, it is still the mother - even after all the concerns about dieting, shame, and blame - who provides open arms when Kate miscarries. It is still Rebecca who comes to Kate's door and encourages her to deal with and manage her grief in her time of need. It is not her husband, nor her brothers who can relate to Kate's pain, and it is not her late father whose sage advice from the past is positioned against her present uncertainty. As Rowe Karlyn argues, there is commonly an "ethos of individualism" that appears intrinsic to white

daughters of middle-class second wave mothers (2011: 29). In the above example, the decision to "fall in" to her mother's arms is left to Kate's discretion. However, the lack of touch and bodily discomfort between Kate and Rebecca is representative of a deeper sense of disquiet and even of disgust in specifically fat-involved relationships. While Kate and Rebecca's bodies resist closure and exist in liminal space, they also are subject to a series of embodied value judgments that are constantly being passed between them. Their bodies themselves are in dialogue, in a conversation that crosses - though may not transcend - the lines between their respective generational framings.

Conclusion

Women-centric TV programmes have long continued the narrative tradition of framing the mother-daughter relationship through the rhythms and patterns of the Eleusinian myth. In this chapter, I have demonstrated how the involvement of fat in this relationship brings together a series of overlapping metaphors and morals, allowing for these well-known narrative patterns and gendered relations to be broken open and reassessed. In choosing to consider fatness as something "involved" with these relationships, I present a framework for nuanced analysis that thinks of identities not as binary truths but rather as constructed states that interrupt or disassemble existing paradigms.

Governed within and through the rhythms and flows of the archetypal mother-daughter relationship – harking back to the myth that acts as its foundation – the fat body finds a home within feminist media studies. In line with foundational feminist thinking about intergenerational bonds and tensions, the lens of fatness creates new pathways by which to consider the ideals of motherhood and the moral expectations placed upon daughters. These considerations overlap with questions posed about the role of race, gender, and class in structuring familial bonds. Placing fat in this context, I contend, makes room for new considerations of traditional narrative forms.

As the structures and patterns of serial television are so integrated with the structures and patterns of daily life, key concepts from television studies present particularly useful in further articulating fat as both identity and construction. Thinking through the many connections between serial TV and the fat body, this study presents an intervention into reading fat as more than a simple identity category (if there is such a thing). Setting up the

concepts of emotional motion, considering domesticity, and interrogating questions about quality TV, I argue that "fattening" the mother-daughter relationship presents a foundation upon which to analyse other popular iterations of fat-involved mother-daughter relationships.

For the purposes of this chapter, I applied these conceptual collisions to the examples of Mama June Shannon and Honey Boo Boo as well as Rebecca and Kate Pearson. Through analysis of their fat-involved relationships, I was able to demonstrate not only how these relationships are altered as a result of their involvement with fat, but also how future studies might approach their considerations of fat as an intersectional lens. There is potential in breaking open familial relationships in this manner, and many other examples fell out of the scope of this study. There were a number of examples from Mama June and Honey Boo Boo and from *This is Us* that fell outwith this work; for example, I considered but did not include thinking about how other spaces might enable fat involvement in unique and compelling ways. One example I would like to develop further finds Rebecca and Kate meeting and separating at various points of the series around swimming pools; these are very vulnerable spaces where bodies are on display and where familial relationships can be put to the test. Further, I did not consider here how fat might fat interrupt, for example, the relationships between people who are not subjected to the white, heterocentrist expectations of the cult of true womanhood. I wonder how the involvement of fat may (or may not) interrupt the relationship between *Shrill*'s Fran – a fat, Black, queer woman – and her mother in the conflict dramatised between them at a family wedding. I also wonder how we might read fat in relationships between fathers and sons, whose gendered connections to one another could constructively complicate the arguments put forward here.

Such considerations, as I have explored in this chapter, may prove useful to future feminist interrogation of relationships on television. The involvement of fat between individuals presents new pathways toward recognising and understanding lived experiences, realities, and the more ephemeral qualities of identities and relationships. Studying fat in this manner could allow textual studies of bodies to crack open any number of affiliations and connections, even those for which our understandings appear to be fixed, inherent, or otherwise invisible. This is a similar outcome to that of the chapter to come, which asks

questions about the seemingly positive effects of the body positivity movement and the shift toward wellness in TV.

Chapter 3 (Un)apologetic Fatties on Woke TV

Introduction

It is early May 2021 and I am watching the first episode of the third (and final) season of *Shrill*, fat blogger Lindy West's memoir-turned-sitcom on streaming service Hulu. Just as I click play, an ad pops up: "This episode of *Shrill* is presented," I am told in a sultry voiceover against a bright, arty mock up of the show's logo, "by Halo Top." This notice is followed by a 30 second advertisement (Halo Top Creamery 2021a) for the low-calorie frozen dessert of the moment, which comprises of fewer than 400 calories per tub and yet "actually tastes like ice cream" (halotop.com n.d.). The ad, which features two fat men lounging and dancing on a beach while one eats a pint of ice cream and the other enjoys a "fruit pop," is shaded in a gentle pastel blue as phrases flash across the screen: "I 'should' buff up" as the man admires a muscular surfer and looks down to the exposed, hairy belly under his ice cream; "I 'should' do some cardio" as both men watch a pair of runners go by; "I 'should' skip dessert" as they dance and delight in icy scoops of soluble corn fiber and Erythritol. The ad ends with a bold claim: "So good. Zero 'shoulds.'" I take in these words with stunned silence, but not because they are unfamiliar. This ad is part of a series from Halo Top that I have seen many times. The first (Vladan G. Jankovic 2020) features a fat model dancing through a luxurious apartment in her underwear and eating the ice cream along to another set of "shoulds:" skip meals, be a size 6, and feel bad about dessert. Another, an advert for fruit pops (Halo Top Creamery 2021b), takes place at a pool party where the (thin) subject "should" swim laps, turn down the radio, and leave on her swimsuit cover. These end with the same demand: "stop 'should'ing yourself."

It is not the ad itself that catches me off guard, but rather the blatantly diet-affirming corporate sponsorship of a show that purports to have its roots in a more radical - and, specifically, an anti-diet - politics of representation. This was not just an ironic commercial break, pairing together two dissonant ideas unintentionally; this was a seeming mutual endorsement between Halo Top and *Shrill*. Of course, like other mid-budget television shows masquerading as independent endeavours, *Shrill* caters to network expectations, and

not just in its tacit endorsement of trendy treats. The show, like many others, engages with what is popular, and right now it is popular to engage with the politics of social justice (albeit through a positive-leaning framework of rugged individualism and consumer choice). In other words, in this moment, it is popular to be "woke."[1] Built as it is upon the (shaky) foundations of for-profit social justice, woke television like *Shrill* is characterised by contrasting intentions. While it is broadly defined by a given television show's engagement with complexity and conflict, woke TV remains committed to simplifying these issues for maximum consumption and financial yield.

Figure 3-1 Halo Top ad (2021a). Text reads: "So Good. Zero 'Shoulds'"

As a manner of addressing social justice, then, woke TV is neither wholly regressive nor entirely radical, leaving its language and style imbued with a palpable uncertainty and privilege on both sides of the camera. A powerful example of this, *Shrill* vibrates with a cheery, Liberal optimism so detached from historical context or intersectional thought as to only nominally address systemic fatphobia and fat denigration or its intersection with other politics. For, where actions or identities depicted in *Shrill* may be sold and perceived as radical, that activist potential is quickly curtailed by a simpler, more individualistic, and

[1] "Woke" here is the popularised term derived from the African-American usage; this term refers to social justice-oriented concepts more broadly, while the original referred to awareness of racial prejudice exclusively ("woke, adj. 2" n.d.).

considerably more profitable promise: that of personal contentment through self-love. And yet, at the same time, *Shrill* provides a pleasure, a comfort, and, potentially, an argument for the sustenance of fat lives.

It is not my aim to either denounce or reify the importance of wokeness, woke television, or fat representation, as such. Rather, in performing the work of unpicking contemporary representations of fatness, I seek out the "incrustations" built up around representations of fatness, which serve as useful guideposts for the cultural context of anti-fat bias in the present moment (Bennett 1982: 9; D'Acci 2004; Martin 2020: 69). I do so by first analysing the poetics and aesthetics of transcendence - via self-love and "awakening" - in the narrative, which substantiate and support the imagined role of the individual in radical fat activism and justice. I then turn to the idea of the unapologetic fat body in order to draw this critique out. Here, I further articulate the role of mediated networks and popular movements (in this case, the body positivity movement) in positioning fatness not simply as antithetical to personal wellbeing, safety, happiness, comfort, and morality, but rather as that which must be made weightless. Finally, I close with a rumination on the ephemeral qualities of wokeness and the soothing power of imagination and desire, or lack thereof, under the neoliberal conditions of American individualism. I ultimately argue that gestated in conditions of ambivalence, uncertainty, positivity, and imagination, wokeness expertly evades a critical gaze when it comes to fatness; deftly picking and choosing the moments of radical dialogue and those of empty optimism and promise, the woke image of fat offers little more substance than Halo Top's dairy-free low-fat chocolate chip cookie dough "frozen dessert" - now with only 360 calories per pint.

Fat Aesthetics of Wokeness and Transcendent Self Love: The Pool Scene

When the first season of *Shrill* was released in 2019, it arrived with great fanfare. The show, an Instagram-friendly series following the life, loves, and workplace antics of a Millennial fat woman in Portland, Oregon, was primed for success among fat and thin folks alike; Lindy West's eponymous 2016 memoir-cum-essay collection was already incredibly popular in no small part because of West's "unapologetic and proud" voice, which she used

to correspondingly address systemic anti-fatness. As West extends raw and personal humour to topics like internalised fatphobia, sexual assault and online death threats in the memoir, it followed that the show would espouse a similar ethos (Riley 2019). Incidentally, the landscape of streaming TV had helped to provide a ready place for *Shrill*. The first season materialised amidst a fiery debate over the renewal of Netflix teen drama *Insatiable* (2018-2019), which had infamously drawn ire for its fat-shaming weight-loss revenge plot (Scott 2019). Under these conditions, and with the casting of two already-famous fat women in the lead roles - *Saturday Night Live* (1975 -) veteran Aidy Bryant as protagonist Annie and Black British actor Lolly Adefope as her best friend Fran - the show's first season was praised as exploding with a "find-yourself beauty" that represented "a more radical push for inclusion and embrace of different body types by society" (Lyons 2019; Lawler 2019). And yet, it is unclear how much of an impact *Shrill* constitutes as an expression of fat activism rather than one weighted toward opportunism.

As Kristen Warner (2017: 32-33) remarks wryly in her essay on popular Black media: "this season, 'representation matters'" insomuch as "meaningful diversity occurs when the actual presence of different-looking bodies appear on screen." Warner is referring to the wider cultural discourse that venerates Black representation on television and which has largely come to equate any increase in representation with radical progress; however, her critique applies to the varying ways in which television and streaming networks have increasingly greenlit shows that deal with topics related to contemporary social justice movements.[2] The term "woke" is used to describe this effect, by which a purported investment in social justice issues is carried out in popular avenues through an invoking of "images and ideas that initially may appear allied with social justice sentiments" but are typically measured in success by their profitability and simplicity and which largely benefit from co-operating with only the most popular aspects of social movements (Sobande 2019: 2724). This very diffusion of progressive and regressive qualities in a capitalist framework is readily found in the dialogues around many popular movements of the last decade. From Black Lives Matter and criminal justice reform, to #MeToo and the body positivity

[2] Warner goes further in assigning woke diversity as presenting what she terms "plastic representation," a concept that does not gel as naturally with my work as her thinking *around* this idea.

movement, the hegemonic structure of capitalism leaves both willing and unwilling participants in a liminal space where elements like individual identity, "diversity," or corporate entanglement come to matter a great deal and yet, at once, to matter very little (Warner 2017). That liminality is only further laid bare when it comes to representation for profit in an arena where prior popular representation has been comprised primarily of thin, white, straight, and wealthy characters, as is the case on American television.

The last decade has witnessed a prolific swell in television and media content that purports to be socially-aware, from Netflix shows like *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, which parades its wokeness through plotlines about trans identity or racial tension, to the recent rebrand of reality show *The Biggest Loser* as a "wellness" programme supposedly intended to promote health *as well as* weight loss. It is no coincidence that woke shows like these arrive to the screen as a great deal of political energy under capitalism is increasingly directed toward self-improvement and individualism rather than collective action or public health. The Halo Top sponsorship of *Shrill*, followed in subsequent episodes by a range of Millennial-catering companies specifically "sponsoring" or "presenting" episodes, such as the home store Lowe's and the cutesy winery Barefoot, simply illuminates the contrast between the stated and implicit aims of woke television. Wokeness is a profitable enterprise precisely because it upholds capitalist standards of consumerism and allows critics of contemporary TV to focus on how well "the politics of representation" perform at "counting visible identities" rather than on the qualities, nuances, or meanings of representations (Shacklock 2019: 510, Warner 2017). The visual style of the Halo Top sponsorship advert cements this further, depicting a racially-diverse group of subjects cast in pastel hues and bright lighting not dissimilar to that of *Shrill* in order to auction off the lifestyle provided by a diet food — only moments before the start of a show most famous for "quietly revolutionizing the portrayal of fat women on television" (McCarthy 2021).

Despite its many proponents, then, there has long been a dissonance between *Shrill*, its claims to progressive activisms, and its actual politics. Even as conversation celebrating the radical potential of fat representation entered mainstream dialogue when the show premiered, parallel critiques emerged online which focused on its failures at checking certain boxes of representation. One prominent line of inquiry, for example, was *Shrill's* ability to decentre, or at least recognise, whiteness while being presented as a show with the power to

universally "normalise" fatness on TV; this intersected with critiques of *Shrill* for side-lining queer storylines in favour of straight ones, as Fran is a queer, Black character while Annie is "yet another" straight, white lead (Bogart 2020). Responding to Jenelle Riley's (2019) claim in *Vanity Fair* that *Shrill* is "the best kind of art; a specific story that manages to feel universal," blogger FatAngryBlackGirl argues that there is "very little that is universal" about the perspective of a "fat white cis/het" woman (FatAngryBlackGirl 2019; Leight 2019).[3] Still, there is a sense of urgency present in the majority of critical writing around the show that suggests, very specifically, its cultural significance: "this series is the kind of story we *need to see more of* on TV" (Leight 2019, *emphasis mine*); its positioning of Fran on the periphery is "important, and should be considered by viewers" (Ellis 2019); *Shrill* offers "a necessary voice" to the growing spate of women-centred TV shows (Alptraum 2019, Searles 2019).

Such hand-wringing around the "importance" of representation is notable because, despite reception of the bold representation of fatness in *Shrill* as something novel, its aesthetic and poetic qualities are actually safely nestled in the tradition of women-centric televised dramedies. Carrying relatively high production values and espousing explicitly feminist sensibilities, *Shrill* and its contemporaries, such as *Girls* (HBO 2012-2017), *Broad City* (Comedy Central 2014-2019), *New Girl* (Fox 2011-2018), *Insecure* (HBO 2016-2021), and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (The CW 2015-2019), negotiate feminist ideals through the mundane and the everyday, centring conflicts on micro-aggressions in the workplace, relationship dramas, and household spats (Ford 2019). While this cycle of women-centric dramedies "occupies an in-between space where the series are clearly pro-woman and negotiate feminist ideas," the shows that fit this description are understandably not consistent in their approach to or alignment with these ideas (Ford 2019: 935). For this reason, not all woman-centric dramedies fit the description of woke television despite their shared engagement with feminisms and, often, their individual engagements with intersecting narratives of race, class, age, size, and gender. The ones that do fit the woke profile, however, share in particular a positive liberal aesthetic and a cheerful championing of individuality.

[3] Lisa Kelly (2013) notes similar criticisms levelled against the position of Lena Dunham in *Girls*, noting the show's inability to access or deal with a cultural politics of difference in a meaningful way, thus falsely universalising the cis/het protagonist.

Carrying on and extending the tradition of long-running American network sitcoms of the 90s and early 00s (*Friends* (1994-2004); *How I Met Your Mother* (Fox 2005-2014); *Will & Grace* (NBC 1998-2006, 2017-2020)), these shows centre on people who live on their own or in shared accommodation who are considered young enough to "be selfish" but too old to be entirely reliant on their parents. Their narratives are couched in middle-class imagery and cobbled together from the supposed trappings of Millennial life which suggest a sense of suspended adolescence: houseplants, bubble-gum pastels, floral prints, worn-out university hoodies, jackets made from vintage quilts, ironic roller-skating rink birthday parties.

Shrill, operating in this sphere, follows the fat, bubbly, and eternally chatty Annie (Aidy Bryant), a journalist at small Portland newspaper *The Thorn,* through her journey of self-acceptance and workplace success. Throughout the series Annie juggles the banalities of everyday relationships alongside her self-acceptance - a difficult man-child boyfriend, a father with cancer, a mother who struggles to engage in truthful dialogue, and a boss who is sceptical of her professional capabilities - while enjoying life in a house she shares with her long-time best friend, the unapologetic Fran (Lolly Adefope). The show has been compared to HBO's *Girls* for both its visual language - one of "gentle (almost imperceptible) push-ins, planimetric frame composition and close framing of facial reactions" - and its narrow focus on the aspirations of a Millennial writer with something to prove (Ford 2019: 929; Palmieri 2019). However, Annie's body, as opposed to *Girls* which drew extensive criticism for its cavalier portrayals of actress Lena Dunham's nude figure, is not portrayed as messy or sexually reckless.

Instead, *Shrill* places a powerful emphasis on Annie's likeability and relatability. It does so through Annie's costuming, dressing her in disarmingly cutesy dresses with collars, patterned tops, and embroidered sweaters, and through careful framings. Whether Annie is sat on her living room floor, perched at her desk looking up at her colleague Amadi, or leaning against a bar while everyone else stands, she is often positioned in the frame so that she looks up at her scene counterparts with wide doe eyes that emphasise her harmlessness. A great deal of Annie's maturation comes through pleasant, unambiguous dialogues where she shares the experience of some universal micro-aggression - a lack of practical clothing in larger sizes, the pain of "chub rub," frustration with an internet troll - followed by self-realisation. That self-realisation is the basis of a recurring narrative of wokeness that occurs

in *Shrill:* the "awakening" of the main character. This is the transformative moment (or set of moments) when the hero is faced with a dynamic obstacle that, for the first time, forces them to reckon with social limitations or political forces that are out of their control. In the woke Netflix drama *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (Netflix 2018 - 2020), Sabrina takes an Eve-like bite of an apple (from the tree of knowledge, no less) and has a bloody - and importantly, galvanising - vision of the Hellish oppressions her witch ancestors have faced; in Hulu's *Woke* (2020-Present), cartoonist Keef is confronted with police brutality and suddenly enters a world of anthropomorphic characters espousing painful truths about systemic racism; in *Girls*, Hannah's parents cut her off from the family finances over a family dinner, and she must, for the first time, reckon with her own vulnerability as an unemployed freelancer.

In *Shrill*, Annie's moment of awakening arguably arrives in the third episode of the first season, when she encounters a confident fat woman on the streets of Portland and is subsequently motivated to change her life. Trying to cross a busy street, Annie finds herself in a standoff with a driver; the car inches forward as she takes a step, both stopping and starting in tandem ("Pencil"). As Annie repeatedly apologises in the direction of the vehicle, a fat woman dressed in a bold red jumpsuit and blazer bypasses her and elegantly crosses the street. Annie cannot help but follow the woman, bewitched by her self-assurance, into a flower shop, where she marvels at the unapologetic ease with which the woman moves through these spaces. Invigorated by the fleeting encounter, Annie chooses to ignore a lazily-crafted text from her ex-boyfriend. Instead, she spends the night with a more stable and caring love interest — Fran's brother — and quietly makes her way to the kitchen to eat leftovers without a shred of shame.

While there is something revelatory about this moment of awakening on its face - even the lack of shame Annie feels when eating at night, for example, is something rarely depicted on TV - it is notable that Annie never encounters a transcendent moment like this in regard to Fran. Although Fran is herself a fat woman with a discernible sense of pride in her own body, and although Fran spends a great deal of time and energy trying to advise Annie on matters of self-care and confidence, it is not until Annie sees a near-duplicate of herself - a middle-class, fat, white woman - that she is able to even consider shifting her perspective. Where Fran's specific advice for Annie is difficult for her to fathom or accept -

requiring Annie to make difficult changes in her approach to romantic relationships, for example - the invisible, transcendent energy of the unnamed confident fat woman provides her with an unsophisticated touchstone. Still, although it is made less diagetically explicit than the struggles vested in Annie's fatness, the power conferred by her whiteness does not go wholly unnoticed in the show.

Annie's selfishness throughout her journey of fat acceptance is an undercurrent in the narrative, forcing uncertainty to bubble to the surface. In the final episode of the first season, Annie tracks down an internet troll - "The Awesome" - who has been harassing her and instigates an altercation on his front lawn. The incident ends with Annie smashing a cement plant pot into his car window and running away, filled with joy and renewed purpose from having meaningfully asserted herself. Although the show does not necessarily acknowledge it in an explicit way, this moment is steeped in obvious privilege. In an interview with *Shrill* writer Sam Irby, queer essayist Sherronda J. Brown notes that this is an act of violence "that would almost certainly get us [both] shot," and is very clearly not widely relatable; "'Not *my* Black ass!' is Sam's sentiment" (Brown 2019). Annie, on the other hand, continues to benefit from this altercation when she, in the subsequent season, finds The Awesome at his workplace and interviews him for a 'Thorn' article. The incident provides Annie with emotional redemption *and* with workplace success, a level of self-improvement contingent on Annie's social standing. The very act of awakening - and subsequently, of being or becoming woke - is grounded in the privilege of ignorance, blind individualism and emphatic self-love drawn directly from the popular body positivity movement.

Likewise, the show regularly employs transcendent moments, scored with dazzling indie pop or experimental hip-hop (Tierra Whack's triumphant 'Pretty Ugly' marks one pivotal occasion), to signify the jubilation and triumph of realisation and fat acceptance. The plot of each episode, already only clocking in at a brief 22-minute runtime, is linked together through these moments in which dialogue fades into the background, music fills the space, and specificities are melted away. Although these points in time are twice reserved for Fran's contemplation of self, they primarily serve as positive markers of Annie's progress, following her awakening to and overcoming of yet another failure of self-confidence or, more rarely, an outspoken fatphobic encounter. In these moments of sensory delight, against

a set dressed in brilliant pinks and blues and shaded in ubiquitous Millennial pastels, Annie exudes confidence as she gleefully strides along a sidewalk after finally telling off an openly fatphobic personal trainer, or enjoys cold pasta from the refrigerator after an affirming sexual encounter, or receives a flirty text from a new crush. These moments happen often throughout the first season of the show and into the following two, heralding Annie's liberation as a "special kind of joy" (Laurion 2019). However, these moments are not always as simple as the pure pleasures they exalt. This is most evident in the popular episode "Pool," when Annie and Fran attend a fat pool party where the complexities of transcendence are put on display.

Fat pool parties, started in the 1970s, are explicitly designed to be spaces where the definition of "beauty" is dismantled and where rolls of fat, ripples of cellulite, or the soft curves of lipoedema might be on display and shared intimately without retribution (Cooper 2011, 2016). In the age of social media, with prominent body positive bloggers like Virgie Tovar and Tess Holliday posting pictures in their swimwear to Instagram and Twitter, the concept of the fat pool party has amassed celebratory pronouncements online. This episode has become one of the primary points of reference in journalistic pieces about *Shrill*; critic Jourdain Searles (2019) writes that the pool scene evokes a "world where discomfort and shame don't have to be the default." Screenwriter Samantha Irby, who penned the episode, said of pitching the scene that getting a "bunch of fat girls in bathing suits on television" seemed "like a coup - if they would let us get away with that" (Shoemaker 2019). The notion of "getting away with" is deeply present in this scene. Nothing similar has existed on such a popular level before, and this is part of what makes *Shrill*'s pool party such a touchstone of progress among critics.

When Annie and Fran arrive at the party, they are met with a sensory delight of pastel pinks, yellows, and greens which splash out from the screen. The pool is a brilliant and enticing blue, surrounded by lounge chairs and tiki bars, and all around the pool, filling the camera in glorious shapes and shades, are radically differing bodies decked out in bikinis and swimsuits. Annie is taken aback, almost in awe or in shock. The button-up t-shirt and jeans she is wearing stand out starkly, stiff against the many nearly-naked fat people swimming, dancing, lounging, and drinking.

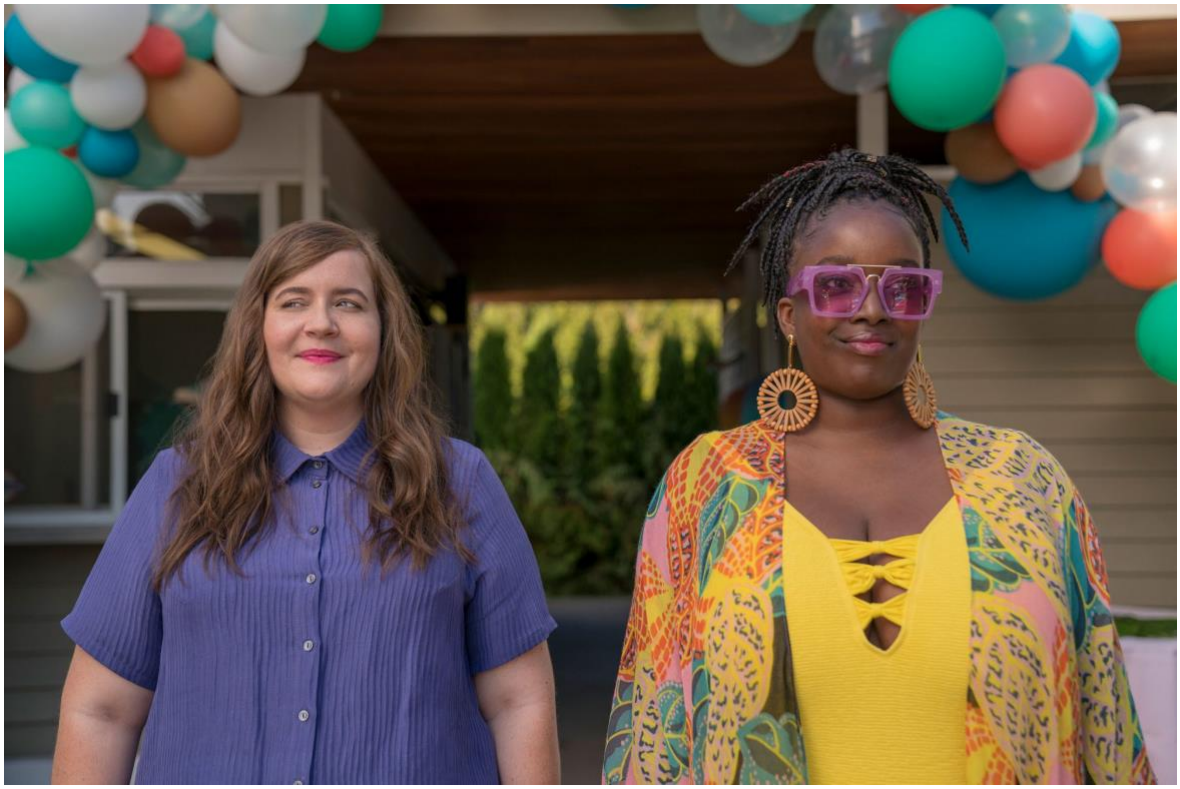


Figure 3-2 Annie and Fran arrive at the body positive pool party

As she makes her way through the crowd, opting not to swim but rather to observe, the camera follows Annie's shaky movements. She sits, dangling her feet in the pool; she stands, uncomfortably opting for a frozen margarita at the bar; she walks, shyly approaching a plus size clothing designer. When she makes a new friend who invites her to dance in a circle of free-flowing women, Annie accepts briefly, moving her shoulders slightly. She awkwardly pulls away, but her discomfort does not last long; another woman grabs her hand and drags her back into the fray of dancing bodies. The camera follows Annie's eyeline to the soft bellies and thighs of the women dancing - their fat jiggling recklessly, uncovered and unrestricted. Looking at these women, Annie begins to feel emboldened. She starts to move, slowly at first, until her body falls into a comfortable rhythm with the group. The music rises - Ariana Grande's "One More Time" - and Annie is lifted to a transcendent plane. Here there are no words nor any of the previous moment's fear. There is only the antidote of shared movement and pure joy.

In attempting to model ways of seeing and thinking fatness, *Shrill* provides in the pool party scene (and in other transcendent moments) an invitation to share Annie's kinetic energy. There is a bonded motion between camera and body, emphasised as she travels, moves, and flexes her fat body in ways that have previously been disallowed. The screen

vibrates in tandem with her joyful dancing, not switching to her perspective but rather inhabiting the space alongside; in tacit participation, the camera sidles up alongside Annie's fat body and then drifts back to encompass the bodies of the women with whom she dances, unbinding their fat bodies from stillness, transcending expectations and crackling with friction and electricity. Providing a counterpoint to the distant "headless fatties" of evening news B-roll and "obesity" focused TV documentaries, the camera again dances playfully over and around jiggling bits of bodies: breast tissue that spills out the sides of swim tops, soft rolls across bellies and backs, cellulite in little tracks down jiggling thighs (Cooper 2007). In this space, fat itself is not morally laden or fixed to certain ways of being but is rather depicted as part of a living figure in intentional motion.

Figure 3-3 Annie joyfully swims across the pool

I find the scene particularly pleasurable and exciting to watch because it presents a divine imaginary that is at once brand new and familiar to me, offering close participation in the fantasy of the untethered and weightless self. The sensation culminates in a final rush of pleasure as Annie races over to her chair, strips off her jeans and button-up shirt, and reveals a soft pastel swimsuit. Dashing to the edge of the pool, she catapults into the cool blue water. Bubbles float up from her smiling mouth and she swims with long, confident strokes across the screen. Fat bodies of varying shapes and sizes float all around Annie as she makes her way under the water and, mermaid-like, butterfly strokes in a sustained, fluid motion across the pool. Reaching the centre, she exits the water for a breath, twirls around in disbelief, and dives back in for one last handstand. In a final aerial shot, the camera pulls

back to show Annie's extended legs and pointed toes at the centre of a Busby Berkeley-like kaleidoscope of fat women, twirling, spinning, laughing in the water.[4] The brilliant blue of the pool seems to beckon from the screen, enticing and inviting playfulness, as beachballs careen around the edges of the screen. I am thoroughly immersed, drawn into the pool myself, captivated by the scene's lightness.

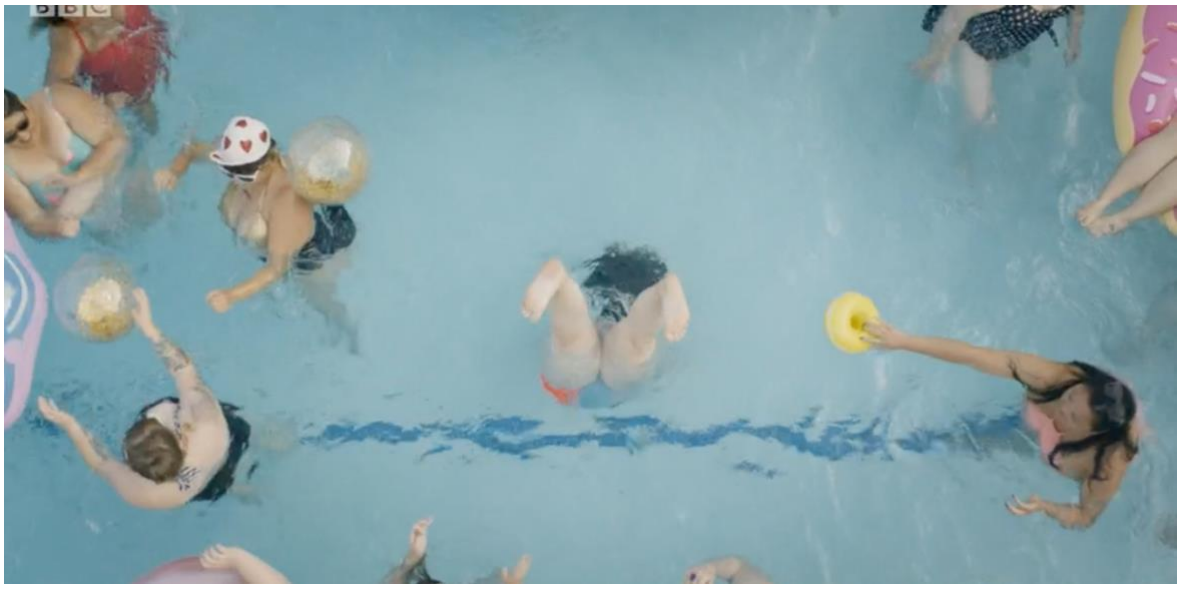


Figure 3-4 Annie does a handstand as fat folks spin and bounce around her

Unapologetic Bodies

Yet, even as I find myself bound up in the rush of "getting away with" this fantasy, I am equally torn by the determination to refrain from engaging in imaginary weightlessness. As I discuss in my analysis of the Thin Woman Within trope, much of the difficulty and liminality of the fat experience is fostered in the fantasy of a body that *should* and *can* be made lighter, less heavy. There is a dissonance I experience often when watching *Shrill* that is rooted in a grappling with my desire for fantasy against my desire for progress. And so, try as I might to avoid employing it - for fear of obfuscating nuance by relying on an increasingly popular concept - the term that continually presents itself as I describe the pool

[4] There is a tradition of fat synchronised swimming in groups like The Padded Lillies and Aquaporko - where small communal groups of fat women gather to share the joy of being in the water while learning intricate dance moves. (PaddedLillies.com; or see: *Aquaporko!* (2013))

scene is the prosaic "unapologetic." In recent years, this term has come to signify radical progress and self-love in popular parlance. It is the word critics use specifically to describe the pool scene (Shoemaker 2019) and *Shrill* more broadly (Cummings 2019; Evans 2020, Mukhopadhyay 2019); it is the term employed in popular fat memoir, as Lindy West self-describes in *Shrill* (112); and it forms the very basis of self-help memoirs from fat bloggers such as Jes Baker's "The Things No One Will Tell Fat Girls: A Handbook for Unapologetic Living" (2015) or Stephanie Yeboah's "Fattily Ever After: A Black, Fat Girl's Guide to Living Life Unapologetically" (2019). The refrain of unapologetic living is one that echoes through the body positivity community and into scholarly work in Fat Studies, perhaps best characterised by Sonya Renee Taylor's (2017) popular assertion that "the body is not an apology." Taylor's elaboration of the unapologetic body revolves around the problem of unnecessary apology because, she argues, fat women apologise for their bodies constantly by hiding them away. The apologising body, to borrow the dictionary definition, is one that performs as an "expression of regret" or offers a "justification, explanation, or excuse" for its fatness ("apology" n.d.). This notion of the pre-awakening (or the pre-"coming out") fat body as apologetic is well-supported, arising in every arena from fashion - for example, the seemingly ubiquitous 50's-style, A-line plus-size Hell Bunny or Torrid brand dresses designed to "create a waist" and hide bellies and hips - to activism, where fat people reclaim possession of their own bodies by self-describing as "fat" rather than using euphemistic references such as "heavy-set" or "big-boned" (Gibson 2020; Saguy & Ward 2011). Unapologetic behaviour, as Renee Taylor would have it, means being "committed" to the idea that "no one should have to apologize for being a human in a body" (Renee Taylor 2017: 37). She says:

> We were told there is a right way to have a body, and our apologies reflected our indoctrination into that belief. We believed there was indeed a way in which our bodies were wrong. Not only have we been trying to change our 'wrong bodies,' but we have also continued to apologize for the presumed discomfort our bodies rouse in others (2017: 35).

In embodying apology, fat people "belabour ourselves," Taylor says, "with all the things we must do to fulfil our purpose or live out our destiny" (Taylor 2017: 19). *Shrill* appears to agree with this diagnosis, providing the pool scene as a visual antidote. As Annie makes her

way across the aquamarine underwater expanse of the pool, dotted with similarly fat women's legs and bums and tums, their shared suspension appears to frame fatness outside the terms of justification or regret. Spared the burden of apologising, it seems, means living a weightless life, blissfully unattached from the ground. In this moment, by their sheer numbers, among intentional movements and joyful colours and soft bodies, the fat women at the pool party appear to shatter the popular notion of apology. These are not fat women where thin women *should* be; they do not constitute some ersatz group of "wrong" bodies where "right" bodies *should* be. In providing a powerful representation of the joys that can accompany weightlessness, the pool scene seems to suggest solving the problem of apology by positively reframing the fat body and making it clearly and vibrantly visible in its weighty-ness. The camera, acting as Annie's eyes, directs the scene through pleasurable looking, lifting fatness into a new contextual frame.

Visibility as a powerful cure is a common thread in unapologetic discourse. Taylor, for example, offers the example of sharing and viewing photos of fat people on Facebook or Instagram to accomplish this aim, which Aidy Bryant herself reaffirms. In a recent interview (92nd Street Y 2020), while answering an audience question about living a more body positive life, Bryant says:

> … I found that looking at women who looked like me? It made me feel that that's normal, and that's good, and *you* can feel normal and good. And it's really like what we were talking about earlier, about representation: go to Instagram, and find people who are like your vibe and look at them, and look at how beautiful they are. Look at how much they're living their lives, and know that it's possible for you, too. I mean, that's really the gist of it, I think. (55:01 - 55:29)

This is the stated aim of body positive content on a massive platform like Instagram or on the small screen of *Shrill*: that it is powerful, even ethical, to see and to be seen in ways that have previously been disallowed, particularly when engaging with people with similar body shapes or styles who are "like your vibe," to borrow Bryant's phrasing. In other words, unapologetic body positivity is predicated on placing a "positive" spin on previously "negative" images with an aim toward self-improvement and betterment.

This push toward "positive" representation contains a powerful moral element. Scholars like Abigail Saguy (2017) and Gemma Gibson (2021) have shown how the imperative for body positivity and joy related to fatness has naturally led to the creation of a binary measure between fat folks. Those who perform fatness through routine references to fitness and health food, for example, are classed socially as "good fatties" and are humanised "differently to bad fatties as they are making strides to change the fate of their 'poor health' by participating in their moral duties" (Gibson 2021: 6). This often takes the form of fat people self-reporting on medical matters to predict and assuage concerns about their health. Marilyn Wann (1998: 10), for example, takes such a defensive approach in her monograph *Fat!So?*, explaining that her "blood pressure, cholesterol, and blood sugars - the three best health indicators - are all normal" and that she maintains a healthy diet and exercise regimen (for more on Wann and fat healthism, see Gibson 2021:7). The tendency toward pushing positivity like this into the realm of radical activism has resulted in myriad effects across contemporary depictions of fatness; these representations are the rapid changes in the body positivity movement writ large. Over the last two decades, the movement - now often shortened to the saccharine hashtag #BoPo - has come, to the frustration of prominent fat activists and scholars like Charlotte Cooper (2016), to espouse an ethos of consumerism rather than one of activism. As the contemporary movement has shifted from small, moderated communities online ("the fatosphere") to corporate-owned social media platforms, its visual language has morphed in kind, privileging heavily curated and primarily feminised images of fatness.[5]

Earlier online images of fat tended to prioritise unapologetic fatness through a break with typical visual pleasures in fashion and outfit sharing. "Fatshion," as the practice came to be called, descended from queer femme culture and a queer femme online community, "where adornment was a means of survival and visibility, and where people came from traditions of using whatever resources were available to them" (Cooper 2016: 172). This practice primarily centred on fat folks posting outfits that explicitly illustrated and reaffirmed the chasm between popular fashion and the clothing actually available and accessible to

[5] The "fatosphere" is a term derived from "blogosphere" to refer to the interconnected network of blogs, personal sites, and social media profiles that make up a "fat community" online (Pausé 2014).

them: t-shirts and leggings under short cotton skirts, exposed bellies, and often mixed and matched bright coloured blouses, bras, suspenders, hats, ties, and many other accessories and trappings that put the body on display in all its alterity. The priority, then, was on sharing lived fatness as a manner of reinforcing the radical nature of difference and on speaking back to corporate interests in regard to heteronormative and size exclusive fashion trends. As Cat Pausé (2014: 84) argues in her analysis of fat "cyberspace," the queering of online spaces and the use of "ugly" images of fatness have widely allowed individuals to "challenge the idea of what fat is, defy the normative roles of, and behaviours related to, body size, and subvert the paradigms surrounding fat and slim bodies."

In contrast, as use of social media apps has become ubiquitous alongside a rise in popularity, the visual language of fatness has shifted to reflect a kind of consumer-citizenship that is based less on criticism of consumer culture and more on the desire to take part in that culture (Cooper 2016; Pausé 2014). Here, we find many images constituting good fatties. This is clearest on Instagram where images of fat take on a few different, but oft-repeated, forms. Posts on Instagram may be glitzy and glamorous in the tone of celebrity, such as Tess Holliday's signature cat eye liner and bouffant or musician Lizzo in a strappy bikini with her backside turned to camera and her rolls on display.

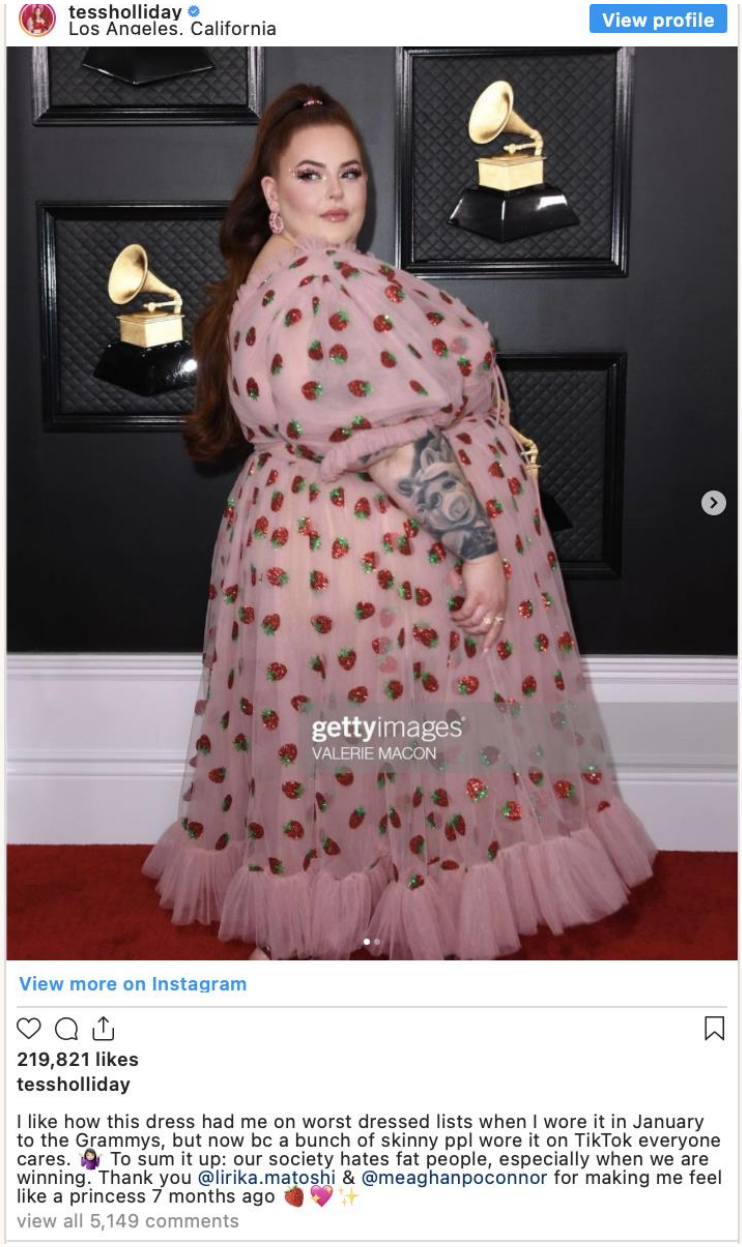


Figure 3-5 Tess Holliday posts on Instagram about thin privilege (Dall'asen 2020)

Images may also take on a more personal quality, looking like plus size blogger Lauren Anderson's (as @LaurenMarigold) selfies donning her collection of seemingly endless pairs of soft pastel Arq-brand underwear and oat milk lattes; Gabi Gregg (as @GabiFresh) in professional shoots wearing a swimsuit from her very own line or, in one specific case, wearing a bright green and pink muumuu while advertising for the Walmart app; or Callie Thorpe (@CallieThorpe) wearing a burnt orange co-ordinated leggings set and doing a handstand on yoga equipment in order to sell tickets to her next yoga class. The images rely on a suite of ever-changing self-confidence hashtags that fall in and out of fashion, such as the previously popular #EffYourBeautyStandards, #ThickThighsSaveLives, and #HonourMyCurves **(**Cohen, Irwin et al. 2019). Although this language seems positive,

centralising the location of body positivity in this register ultimately fosters a kind of gatekeeping. Fat people who perform their fatness online through more "peppy" and aesthetically palatable images with something to sell are upheld over those who are less obliquely positive, and particularly over those with less capital to feature (or to be sponsored by) expensive designer makeup and clothing (Cooper 2016; Murray 2016). Plus size women who dress in hyper-feminine clothing and have access to makeup artists and clothing designers are overall held in higher esteem than those who do not - even among the self-proclaimed activists within the body positivity community (Gibson 2019).

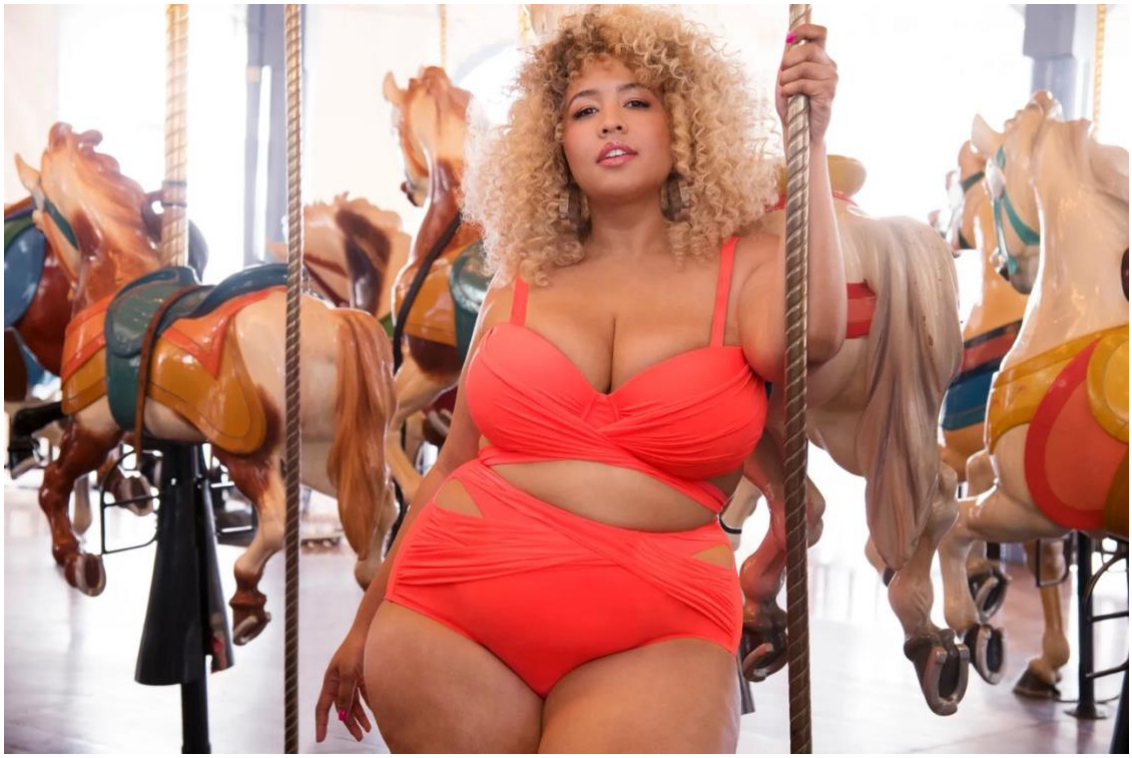


Figure 3-6 Body positive influencer Gabi Fresh models a swimsuit from her collection "Swimsuits for All" (Lawrence 2018)

The pressures of celebrity outside of Instagram can also influence the performance of the good fatty and illuminate the inequities of anti-fat bias. Fat celebrities often lose weight as they become wealthy enough to procure alternative access to healthcare, personal trainers, and chefs (Melissa McCarthy, Rebel Wilson, Adele, Lizzo) or even to opt for surgery and/or radical crash diets (Ashley Nell Tipton, Oprah, Rikki Lake, John Goodman, Roseanne Barr, Kirstie Alley). Fat morality, though, is not only performed in such explicit ways. Often, the good fatty is simply a person who performs fatness within the beauty-driven parameters of self love. A quick search of the #BoPo hashtag on Instagram, for example, brings up a series of women in various designer outfits, many of whom are inarguably thin

but still use the terminology and the visual languages of body positivity. The narrow and simplistic locus of #BoPo has opened the body positivity movement to a problem of (a lack of) specificity. As is true of the social media and aesthetic ally-ship so obvious to #MeToo - in which women sport expensive t-shirts with slogans like "Feminism is For Everyone" - and the recombinant forms of possessive whiteness that proliferate Black Lives Matter discourse online, the rhetoric around the body positivity movement has steadily become popular among thinner and whiter communities; it has thus ultimately morphed to suit a simpler language of universality (Banet-Weiser 2018; Cooper 2016; Cwynar-Horta 2016; Kil 2020). Explicit universalisation is common among movements as they increase in popularity. Black Lives Matter faces calls online that "all lives matter;" #MeToo butts up against #NotAllMen; and the body positivity movement is rife with responses that "all bodies are good bodies." Universalisation is conjured and maintained within and by the transcendent joy and pastel glory of *Shrill*'s dreamy world. Curated through silky filters and designer clothing and middle-class pleasantry, the show's depictions of Annie and Fran sit very much in the realm of the good fatty.

Thus, when Aidy Bryant suggests that women "go to Instagram" to find themselves and normalise their own bodies, she fails to account for a key factor in her release from fat oppression. As for many of the more famous faces in the movement, it is not simply identification with fatness that has bolstered Bryant's self image. She has also become financially secure and is thus able to participate in the expensive aesthetics that make fatness more broadly palatable. Living unapologetically appears to require a level of visibility and consumer participation that is relatively inaccessible. It prizes a certain aesthetics of self-love, based in happiness, lightness, and pleasantry. When they are depicted onscreen, fat joy, wellness, and safety substantiate the (primarily internal) crises of "diet culture" with mechanical efficiency. Large bodies, when they swim in near-synchronised motion, arms outstretched to the sky, tell us not of a world that *is* but one that *might be* - showing "what utopia would feel like, rather than how it would be organised" (Dyer 2002: 20). In so doing, they illuminate the very contemporary desire to become virtual, to become weightless and limitless, to become so optimised or so inundated with our own selves that we might transcend these demonstrably fallible corporeal forms. The goal of fat representation, as *Shrill* seems to propose in its most transcendent moments, is not to progress socially as we

are, but rather to be allowed in on a sacred escape from the shared cultural anxiety around being heavy - or, perhaps more accurately, about having weight at all.

In a 2013 *New York Times* opinion column, essayist Tim Kreider nods at a wider discomfort with corporeality and visibility and the ways in which it seemingly opposes the desire for love and acceptance. “If we want the rewards of being loved,” Kreider contends, “we have to submit to the mortifying ordeal of being known” (Kreider 2013). Over the last few years, this phrase has taken on a second life as a meme, ultimately morphing into the more succinct “please do not perceive me” (Taylor 2020). In its very careful approach to fatness, imbued with gentility and joy, *Shrill* entertains but avoids dealing with corporeality and, as such, avoids making its characters known more deeply. Rather, it relies on the well-worn notion that the visibility of an unapologetic look makes fatness beautiful, and thus that any fatty can become, transcendently, a good fatty. She might even become good enough to - as Annie does in the third season of *Shrill* - get promoted in her job, despite the well-studied fact that American fat women remain more likely to earn significantly less than their peers (Dodgson 2018; Judge & Cable 2011), to be evaluated more harshly by their superiors (Proestakis & Brañas-Garza 2016), and to work in more physically demanding, low wage jobs (Shinall 2014)**.** So: measured by its ability to make a fat woman more visible and to crest these specific barriers, *Shrill* is a success. From the first season, Annie is made noticeable in her brightly coloured dresses, her sky-high chunky heels, and, once, her two-foot-long hair extensions and roller skates. But even in the pool scene - for all its nods to the spectacle of Hollywood glamour and the celebration of nearly-nude fatness - the pastel gloss that encompasses every inch of the screen seems to offer not so much an apology or a solution, but a hazy plea: “Please,” it seems to say despite Annie’s bubble-gum attire, “do not perceive me.”

Representation, Visibility, and Wellness

Perhaps as a result of their own liminal position as both purveyors of art and profitable corporations, television streaming networks and their programmes are as yet mostly excluded from more serious critique about the ways in which evincing transcendent wokeness constitutes not a commitment to structural change, but rather, a recognition of

what is most attractive and profitable in a given cultural moment (Hassler-Forest 2018; Keller 2017; Sobande 2019). It behoves networks to claim that the process of making visible and reinforcing self-love and positivity "matters," and is, crucially, moral (Cottom 2018; Warner 2017). As critics focus on increasingly granular details of identity politics, TV networks seem to increasingly greenlight shows that meet this desire, creating a feedback loop of wokeness that, in turn, relieves both producer and viewer from the discomfort and uncertainty fostered by nuance (Warner 2017). Visibility, in this context, is overdetermined to the extent that it renders the inextricable complexities of representation void in its wake (Banet-Weiser 2007; Harvey 2020: 82-83; Sastre 2014: 937). Further, in conflating the single represented image with a diverse community of differing individuals - as *Shrill* does in plainly presenting its fat main character as a universal voice of fatness - the vibrancy and connection of an activist community is flattened into one that is instead deactivated by being made "for everyone" (Ahmed 2012; Cooper 2016: 165). And, as in the case of Annie, the position of the individual in the struggle against systemic issues is one that engenders a disproportionate focus on simplistic solutions. For comparison, this exact problem of solipsistic simplicity has been raised frequently over the last years with the rise in calls for more diversity training. Arun Kundnani (2020) argues, for example, that the popular approach to education on structural racism - anti-racism and "diversity" training - actually reifies and reproduces the very structures it purports to dismantle; this kind of training does so by ontologising whiteness to the extent that it appears, at least to white students, unchangeably universal and inherent to Western culture. Kundnani argues that there is no alternate pathway while the neoliberal individual remains at the centre. "The structure does not care about your individual attitudes and beliefs." Rather, the only means of breaking free from marginalisation is "to attack the system as a whole, which in this case involves changing laws, perhaps by breaking them" (Kundnani 2020).

Still, although many reviews of *Shrill* briefly acknowledge its limitations in representation and activism, critics feel beholden to appreciating its optimism. Feminist scholars even seem reticent to extend criticism toward *Shrill*, perhaps in fear of shattering the already-fragile bonds of optimism toward fatness. In a review of the show for the "Fat Studies Journal," for example, the reviewer (a fat studies scholar) spends only a few precious clauses noting that *Shrill* "continues the trend of queer Black femmes being overlooked in

popular media as well as the trope of Black femmes as caretakers who take on additional (emotional) labour within interpersonal relationships"; this line of enquiry is immediately hedged by an emphatic statement of the show's political position in the world: "[t]hat said, the series as a whole is extremely important to have in popular media" (Ellis 2019: 90). It remains difficult to parse out the more and less progressive elements without landing on a binary answer to whether or not any given show is, itself, progressive; doubly so, when the television show is representing some kind of identity category that appears to have gone unaddressed on a mainstream stage.[6] This is in part because television is produced and operated within American capitalism; here, the importance of explicit wokeness takes on a dark political edge whereby popular representation genuinely becomes the only possible avenue for marginalised groups to *perhaps* be allowed access to basic human rights.

The wider cultural denigration of fatness is, as I have made clear throughout this thesis, palpably real and the need for a radical response to anti-fat bias has become progressively urgent. In response, the body positivity movement has grown from a set of targeted campaigns - like 2004's infamous Dove Real Beauty Campaign - to an incredibly popular movement with a set of codes and language all its own (Johnston & Taylor 2008). Along the way, visibility and awareness have been positioned as the cures to the social ills of fatphobia to the extent that this directive appears to be taken for granted in most avenues. Media representation, for example, is a core tenet of the memoir *Shrill*, in which West opens with a wry discussion of fat representation: "there was precious little media telling me what I *was*, what I *could* be…. [a]s a kid, I never saw anyone remotely like myself on TV" (2017: 3). She concludes that there are two reductive pathways offered to fat women onscreen; they are either cast as a desexualised, depersonalised mother or an evil, all-consuming monster. To West, increased media representation is the difference between being able to imagine a future for herself or succumbing to a shared cultural view of her body as unapproachable or even cruel. Body positivity vis-a-vis visibility upholds the importance of fat representation on television, which has been laden with so much meaning in the case of fat activism and justice that its importance seamlessly finds its way into wider discourse within the movement. It has become the norm for critics online to ask whether a given show is "good

[6] It is perhaps even more difficult to critique the "importance" of a piece of media without cognisance of the foundational thinking within feminist media studies, as this thesis posits.

or bad" for marginalised representation. The simplistic position of visibility in the movement, via positivity and the proliferation of mediated image networks, is taken for granted in ways that add bias to even empirical conversations on the subject. Recent studies of the effects of body positivity on young women online, for instance, have concluded that "body positive accounts on Instagram" might have - in and of themselves - the power to "provide a unique perspective in an otherwise perfectly manicured environment" and that the movement is thus progressive (Cohen et al. 2019: 53; Lazuka et al. 2020). These studies, however, operate on the assumption that self-confidence expressed through, for example, a full-body picture aligned with positive sentiments is a reliable marker of progress.

This is troubling not because television networks have yet to meet demands for a more diverse group of faces in popular media, but because of the implications that are ignored when representation is championed as a means to an end. The pitfalls of a mindset that places the onus on the individual to, for example, pursue thinness in the name of "wellness," are plainly exposed when applied to bodies "out of bounds" **(**Braziel & LeBesco 2001). At the outer reaches, stretching the boundaries of "average" weight into and past medical categories with death-defying, scare-mongering titles ("morbid obesity"), there are few options afforded fat people for care at a material level; arguably, there are even fewer options for embodied, nuanced fat representation, which has been an area of interest in fat studies for many years. Alongside concerns over "narrative scarcity," critics have long been actively concerned over the "normalizing power of cultural images" connecting fat with abjection and failure (Bordo 1993; 21, 275; Kyrölä 2014; Taylor & Gailey 2021). These issues of representation are framed as powerful actors in spurring on the "war on obesity," and thus resulting in a massive increase in anti-fat bias (Murray 2016). And yet, in these critiques, there remains an inclination to connect fat aesthetics directly to fat oppression, or more accurately, to (yet again) make equivalent the bare minimum of visibility with the complex work of radical progress. Thus, I am sceptical of the popular imagination that representation alone can act as some deus ex machina for oppression. As Alexandra Sastre (2014) compellingly argues, the ideology espoused by the body positivity movement simply "frames the democratization of exposure as liberatory" in order to imagine "the act of exposure as the devic[e] through which bodily acceptance is obtained" (937). Sastre is not alone in this view; in recent years, many scholars in feminist media studies at large (Ahmed

2014; Banet-Weiser 2007, 2016; Cooper 2016; Harvey 2020: 82-83; Gailey 2014) have provided evidence that neither visibility nor popularity serve as particularly useful vehicles for radical change when it comes to television. Indeed, hypervisibility can have a directly damaging effect on oppressed groups by forcing their intimate details into the public eye; in the case of fatness, this has been shown to create an effect of hyper(in)visibility, whereby fat people are constantly and *at once* visible and invisible due to their size (Gailey 2014). And yet, the measures of more and better representation still largely shape the critical discourse around contemporary TV, especially those shows that are perceived to "correctly" portray an underrepresented group through a handful of loosely related individuals.

Where a popular medium like contemporary television *has* addressed fatness as a matter of social justice, then, its language and style has been imbued with a palpable uncertainty and privilege that is neither wholly regressive, nor particularly radical. Recent "wellness" reboots of lifestyle television from the last few years, such as weight-loss competition show *The Biggest Loser* (USA 2020-) and queer-centric lifestyle show *Queer Eye* (Netflix 2018 -), for example, are steeped in a cheery optimism so detached from reality as to belie their continued problematic ties with the neoliberal ideal of an optimal self. These shows, and their counterparts (the social justice-focused reunion of *The Real World* (MTV 1992-2017; Facebook Watch 2019-2020; Paramount+ 2021-), for instance) promise to grapple with woke concepts that their earlier renditions addressed in ways now considered outmoded. However, in reality, lifestyle reboots like these have more aptly been able to evade criticism by strategically employing claims of positive representation rather than by actually restructuring their approach to offer, for example, restorative justice for the *Biggest Loser* contestants mistreated by famously cruel physical trainer Jillian Michaels. Her approach - reflective of the approach taken by the original show for 17 seasons - can neatly be summed up by one of her trademark voiceovers: "What do you *do*?" Michaels asks in an early episode of season 9, referring to the team of fat contestants fighting to keep running on a row of treadmills. "You do the same thing you do every other week: beat the hell out of them" ("902"). And yet, for as transparently callous and dehumanising this language is, the current state of *The Biggest Loser* reboot may be even more damaging. The show was once content with simply forcing a group of fat people to vie for lifechanging sums of money by

enduring gruelling physical challenges on a national stage; now, it wants to keep this core pursuit while at once embodying something praiseworthy, popular, and "positive."

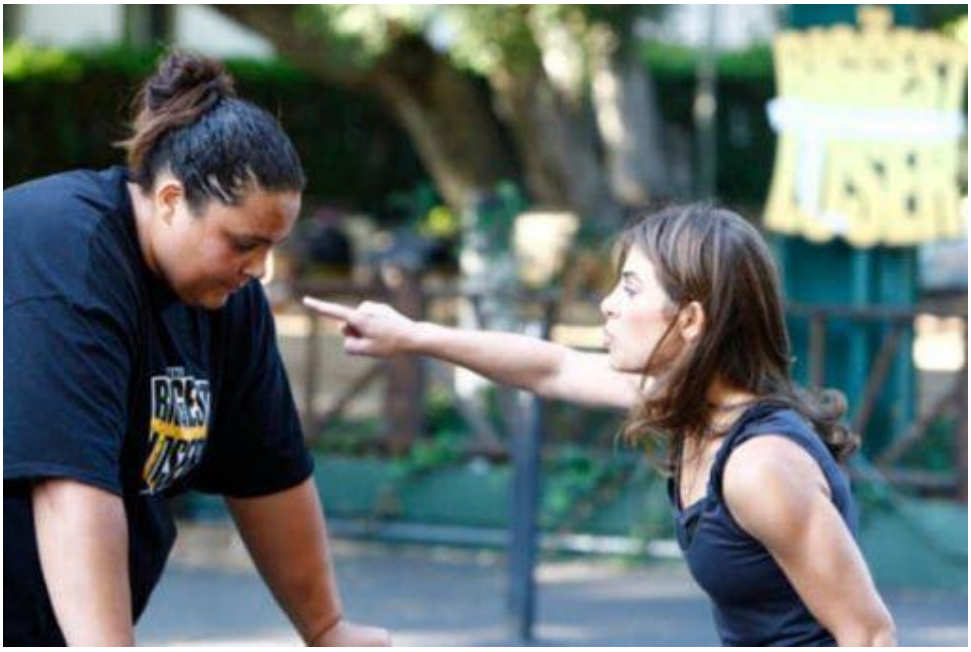


Figure 3-7 Former *Biggest Loser* host Jillian Michaels yells and points at a contestant

Masquerading as holistic and caring, the wellness version of the show relies on the insights of seemingly kinder personal trainers than Jillian Michaels. Now, replacing Michaels' trademark incredulous eyebrows and passionate breakdowns - in one notable rant she breathlessly ordered contestants to "faint, puke or die: but keep walking!" - is Erica Lugo. A physical trainer and former fat woman with a seemingly perpetual smile, Lugo does not actively encourage participants to run until they vomit. She handles her contestants with more tact. In one scene from the first rebooted season, Lugo beams at a large, grey-haired man sweating on a treadmill ("Week 3: Supporting the Team"). The camera, aimed at her irrepressible grin, catches only the width of the man's shoulder and the side of his face as he wipes away tears with the back of a hand. His energy is fading, and there is more running to do. Blinking knowingly, Lugo urges him on with platitudes: "you are allowed to be a masterpiece *and* a work in progress at the same time." And, she pushes the holistic approach of the show; as Lugo would have it: "this is a competition to lose weight, but this is also a competition to change your life" (Brar 2020). The same man, Jim DiBattista, will go on to lose 144 pounds by the end of the season and win the show's grand prize of $100,000. In

interviews following the competition (Thompson 2020), DiBattista happily echoes the same deeply ingrained logic of the show:

> It wasn't about winning. It was about changing my brain, physically breaking down and stripping myself down mentally about food, nutrition, and exercise and building it back up in a way that made it healthy. Because, obviously, something was wrong with my brain to allow me to be 400 pounds.

Centred in these interviews through before and after photos, images of DiBattista's body carry the pretence of wellness and position his past, fat body as problematic and bad.

Despite the show's purported commitment to change, the actual visual and narrative style of the show remains, outside of the kinder language, largely unchanged from the original series. Contestants are still portrayed through handheld cameras that sway and zoom in on their body parts or the inelegance of motions like running on a treadmill or dragging an enormous tyre. Later episodes in the first rebooted series see blurry and dark videos of the (much fatter) contestants trying activities for the first time, positioned against their new, improved, thinner selves performing the same activities with ease ("Final Four"). Finalist Colby, in a grey shirt and shorts, huffs and puffs as he labours over a rowing machine. His double chin jiggling and lips pursed in concentration, he is the epitome of the bad fatty; this is immediately contrasted by his thinner/after self, in a bright orange t-shirt, smiling as he confidently pulls back the band. "Ain't no thing, but a chicken wing," he later quips, dragging heavy weights across the gym floor by a rope.

A similar, though more muted, progression in tone happens between the original *Queer Eye* (Bravo 2003-2007) and the 2018 reboot of the same name. *Queer Eye* (originally named *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and shortened after the first series) is a makeover show starring five gay men ("the Fab 5") intent on quickly training a straight man to "see himself with the same critical eye as his gay hosts" (Sender 2006). The original Fab 5, although not as cruel as Jillian Michaels, would take digs at their participant for his interior decorating ("This room is just stupid"), fashion ("Put some shoes on. You look like a

hillbilly") and lifestyle ("We're here to help you develop really expensive habits").[7] The reboot does away with these digs in favour of a softer teasing and with an even more powerful emphasis on individual effort. While the original Fab 5 were critical of the participants' tastes in fashion, decor and hobbies, this more recent group cloaks their criticism in pithy one-liners and euphemisms. Lifestyle-guru Karamo Brown tells one participant in a soothing tone of voice: "Being an adult means being a person of action… when you make your plan and go after that plan, you'll succeed" ("Big Little Lies"). A positive-sounding phrase, there is a more sinister critique hiding underneath. That is, the expectation of performing normativity and wealth on and in the body is tied up in notions of adulthood and what it means to be an adult, or to act as a proper adult in contemporary society. The niceties and the potential for wealth and fame are what position the show as important. Its paternal and patronising tone further upholds wellness as a way of seeing ability and size through a patriarchal and capitalist lens.

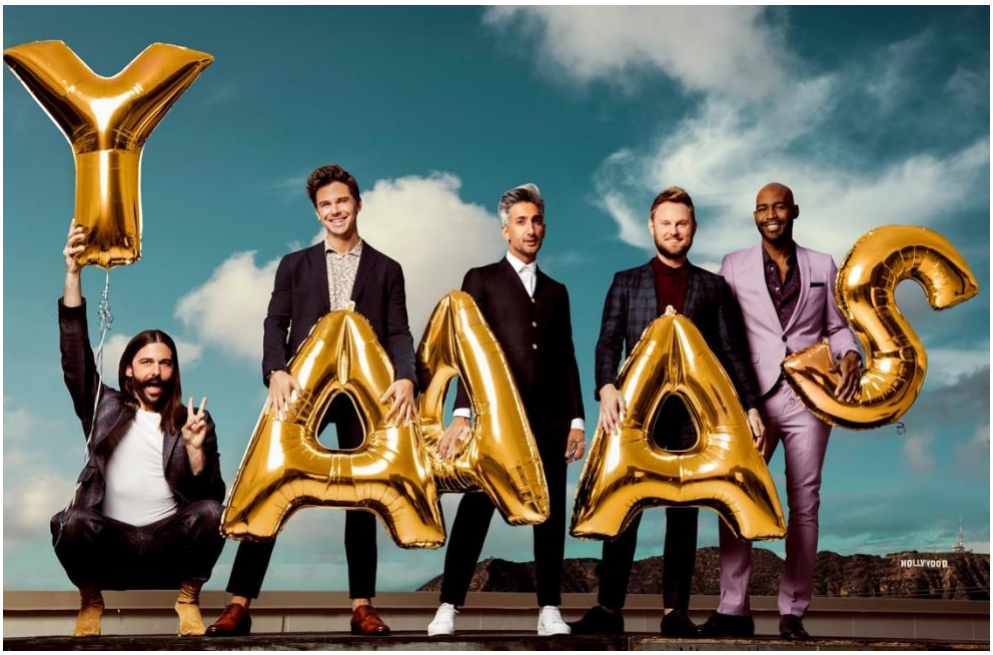


Figure 3-8 The celebratory cast of *Queer Eye* (Jonathan, Antoni, Tan, Bobby, and Karamo) hold up balloons spelling out the joyful internet-popular phrase, "YAAAS" (ABC 2018)

[7] For a comprehensive discussion of the original series and its relationship to neoliberal politics see Sender (2006).

Aesthetics, here, remain the recourse to some semblance of proper biocitizenship; it is still true that individual improvements must always be in process, but in the case of the *Queer Eye* reboot, these should be done with "love" and "care."

There is resounding praise, especially online, for the way wellness-minded shows effect caring change at this individual level.[8] The shifts in tone from obliquely cruel to gently optimistic are marked as important, as changes with a great deal of meaning for oppressed groups who simply have not had the drive to progress without coaching or insistence. Reality television has been - and continues to be - scrutinised for its connection to the neoliberal idea of self-help and as a poor replacement for government programmes and welfare. And yet, there is something darker embedded in these more recent iterations (Kosciesza 2021; Ouelette & Hay 2008; Redden 2018; Sender 2006; Skeggs 2009). For, although the optimistic tone of these reboots is blatantly different than their turn-of-the-century predecessors, a change in effect toward participants' wellbeing is less clear. These programmes are still populated by "experts" at wellness, whose lives are optimised and who have supposedly earned the right to counsel "failed" subjects toward "better" ways of living. *The Biggest Loser* is still a show about publicly losing weight for a cash reward. *Queer Eye* is still a show aimed at making people into better consumers. And both shows benefit from their connections to wellness and positivity. These are complex intersections, because they do appear to, on the surface, demarcate clear social progress. However, in taking for granted the importance of the aesthetically pleasing image, whether made thin or made-over, these wellness reboots seem to embody yet another death knell to the far away promise of public welfare. That is, resistance to the plastered-on smiles of Coach Erica Lugo or the gentle nodding of Karamo Brown would provide more than just evidence of a poorly constructed neoliberal biocitizen. Resistance to positivity would signal a refusal to accept imagined futures in favour of lived realities; that kind of refusal comes at a literal cost. Winning *Biggest Loser* - even securing the post-elimination prize of $25,000 - means being rewarded with a life-changing amount of money. Being featured on *Queer Eye* means accumulating a new wardrobe, newly refurbished home, a subscription to a new hobby, and potentially a

[8] Not all readings of these reboots are taken in by the positive sheen; for example, *Indiewire* critic Tyler Hersko calls *The Biggest Loser* a "vapid relic of a bygone era" (2020) and Sophie Gilbert of *The Atlantic* says the show has the "same fundamentally toxic setup" (2020).

new network of friends. Both open up avenues to monetising the self by capitalising on public appearance. Winners of *Biggest Loser,* for example, have gone on to mobilise their brief fame by motivational speaking, athleisure sales, and marketing for fitness-routine empires SoulCycle and CrossFit (Miller & Neid 2019). Two *Queer Eye* contestants whose restaurant was made-over have turned their barbecue sauce sales into a major business, even appearing on Steve Harvey's talk show *Steve* (2017-2019) to sell their handmade sauces ("Hey Steve!"; White 2019). The shift to positivity, then, is met with a popular obsession in mapping the lasting effects of these programmes on people's lives so as to reassert their worth as "legitimate" rather than "trashy" in the public eye.

The illusion of the power of individual effort is powerful for a lucky few privileged enough to demonstrate aesthetic and representative potential in the face of monetary need, particularly those willing to perform as fulfilled by lightness and satisfied by apologetic positivity. Further, the representation of fat bodies in these wellness-driven spaces is specifically taken for granted as necessary in a country where even the most basic of health care provisions are reserved for those wealthy, thin, and able enough to "deserve" them. Fat people are not only routinely turned away from receiving appropriate medical care, they are also demonised in public health campaigns and blamed for a range of perceived societal ills. In the US, they have long shouldered the blame for a failing medical infrastructure; "obesity" has been bluntly framed as an epidemic for more than three decades, despite a growing body of research demonstrating how "obesity" rhetoric "is rooted in and reproduces particular moral readings of (fat) bodies" rather than in faithful, rigorous readings of fact (Bacon & Aphramor 2014; Evans 2006: 261). Health researchers continue to consider fatness a disease of mind and body even throughout the COVID-19 pandemic arguing, under the guise of care for fat patients, that the US is experiencing a "dual pandemic threat" (Ryan et al 2020: 847). Added to the consistent messaging on long-running television shows, in which fat people are routinely abused (naturally, *The Biggest Loser*), ridiculed (*My Big Fat Fabulous Life* (TLC 2015 -)), and made spectacle (*My 600-lb Life* (2012 -)), the embracing of a woke sensibility denotes a practical desire to shift deeply held biases about "obesity" through more mundane and inoffensive imagery of fat people as "normal," sexual, and able-bodied.

The short-lived *Dietland* (AMC 2018) provides an example of a fat acceptance journey that is explicitly not positive or particularly self-loving in its approach. *Dietland*

follows fat protagonist Plum Kettle, who ghost-writes for a women's magazine under the pseudonym of a senior executive: the very wealthy (and incredibly thin) Kitty Montgomery. The show, which at first sees Plum on a journey of self-acceptance, troubles the typical individualist narrative propagated by *Shrill*. While Plum has to dismantle her internalised fatphobia and self-hatred by shedding the pseudonym of Kitty and operating more boldly in the world, the goal of her journey is not personal success in her writing career or purely emotional self-love. Rather, Plum becomes embroiled in a series of increasingly leftist community groups, wherein she learns through trial and error that finding a profitable voice is less radical than forming a small, nearly silent, part of a diverse collective. By the end of the season, she finds herself faced with the choice to join a network of women who track down and brutally kill elite men who have been accused of sexual crimes - a pointed reference to the inaction inherent to online cancellation in the #MeToo movement. The group operates under the single name "Jennifer." In an emotional final scene, Plum nearly denies the opportunity to join Jennifer on a raid ("Bedwomb"). Standing on a dark street as the rest of the collective drives away, she turns her back to the retreating cars and then, slowly, turns back. She picks up her pace and finally, begins to run toward the camera. Here, Plum is not running *away* from a personal act of petty violent awakening, as with *Shrill*, but rather *toward* the radical potential of collective action. The women in the cars do not "look like" Plum; her identification with them does not stem from positivity nor from the kind of blissful awakening Annie experiences in following the woman at the flower shop. Plum is invigorated and empowered by difference. She is emboldened by discarding her personal interests for fame as a writer or for weight-loss as a good fatty. She is no longer simply Plum Kettle; she, and the rest of the group, is/are Jennifer.

Although this narrative may not be strictly anti-capitalist, there is a radical message encapsulated in the eschewing of individual identity politics reliant on strict categories of race, size, class, or gender in favour of a trust and solidarity at the cost of relatability and pleasantry. Still, this is a difficult and even fraught narrative which relies on a willingly critical gaze and creates a sense of unease, rather than of comfort. This is, very likely, the

primary reason that *Dietland* was cancelled after only one season.[9] Polarising and thorny narratives are simply not as profitable as those which soothe a cultural anxiety through easy answers and tidy heroes' journeys. Instead, television streaming networks can rest more easily in the efforts of making visible bodies considered "under-represented" on both sides of the camera. But there is also a murkier element at play. *Dietland* has not been discounted for causing discomfort in *all* audiences; in fact, the difference in reception is clearly divided between fat and non-fat audiences (Taylor & Gailey 2021). Popular criticisms of *Dietland* largely take for granted that the anti-fat bias it portrays is as grossly exaggerated as the bloody murders committed by Jennifer. Some critics at the time claimed the overt representations of fat discrimination in the show are unrealistic; "it seems that we are expected to believe that Plum lives in a world where being a woman of her size is so remarkable and so unheard of that a group of rude men would go out of their way to take a picture of her. To share it? To laugh? Who knows!" (Faircloth & Reynolds 2018). In contrast, however, Plum's encounters with physical violence, verbal abuse, poor healthcare, and difficulty dating in Dietland "are remarkably true-to-life," as Taylor and Gailey show in their recent study of North American fat women and their self-reported experiences with anti-fat bias (Taylor & Gailey 2021: 46). The combination of interviews and surveys of fat women show that "[t]here is a clear disconnect between what critics and viewers think fat women experience and the reality of their lived experiences" (36). Although this study draws from a relatively small sample group, it reinforces a known quantity in fat representation: the good fatty's performance as healthy, well, and compliant - arguably, as apologetic - caters specifically to thinner audiences and to cultural assumptions about fatness as antithetical to wellness.

Conclusion

If television is, as Zoë Shacklock (2019: 513) writes, "the traditional medium of community," then it follows that televised images are inseparable from the cultural climate

[9] This is starkly clear as the news of *Dietland*'s cancellation coincided with news of renewal for Netflix show *Insatiable* (2016-2018), a show that follows a fat woman as she becomes thin and takes revenge on her former bullies.

and movements with which they coincide. This is nothing new in television, which has long been associated with a sense of present-ness, but a specifically woke sensibility and the need for positivity is rooted in this particular cultural moment. For *Woke*, as it coincides with George Floyd's murder at the hands of police and a heightened online awareness of Black Lives Matter movement, the show centres, however timidly, on police brutality. When *Girls* aired, the rise in "Lean In" and popular feminism bolstered the show's engagement with elitist privilege and an almost-wild sexual freedom. As for *Shrill,* increasing measures in the "war on obesity" coincide with #BoPo dialogues to make the presence of the onscreen fat body itself into a potentially radical act. Running through each of these is the overwhelming sense that these representations, in and of themselves, matter. And, in a sense, they do. That is, representation matters (#representationmatters) insomuch as it constitutes the momentary satisfaction of an anxious desire for control. Representation is upheld as a manageable solution amidst a sea of seemingly insurmountable crises - the wildly mis-managed COVID-19 pandemic, a rapidly decaying climate, collapsing infrastructures, ever-growing fascism visibly affecting American politics, global violence based in the folklores of race and gender - which are only becoming more conspicuous in the public consciousness. It makes perfect sense that the delicate fantasy of individualism, positivity, and unapologetic selfhood fulfills a widespread yearning for order in chaos. As fatphobic rhetoric and policy-making, for example, increases in every arena with public-facing fat women receiving regular death threats and fearing for their lives in a largely uncaring medical establishment, it follows that something like the bubble-gum cool of *Shrill* would seek to right these wrongs through relatability and pleasantry, in a way that clearly and rightfully belongs to the individual.

Woke shows like *Shrill* render an alternative present where individualism constitutes freedom rather than oppression and marginalised bodies signify difference rather than threat in order to bolster a multiplicity of representation. By this measure, *Shrill* may offer a gift of diversity worthy of celebration. Should we desire to quantify that diversity, in order to measure it against its contemporaries, we see that the show employs people from a number of marginalised groups, among others: a fat woman actor (Aidy Bryant); an openly trans actor (Patti Harrison); a fat, Black woman actor (Lolly Adefope); a Black director (Shaka King); and a fat, Black staff writer (Samantha Irby). Yet quantitative measures, too, fall short as a sole methodology for dealing with these complicated questions around worth and

meaning and tone. Rather, a nuanced approach likely means letting go of the uncritical importance of woke representation, lest we continually accept that which constitutes "enough" in fear of that which represents a risk or a critical challenge. For, when we praise wokeness for wokeness' sake, we shift the "goal posts of expectation" to "more comfortable places for those in power" and thus reduce the possibility of a meaningful and complex multiplicity of representation at all levels of production and prestige (Warner 2017: 37). In this manner, we reassert, and thus overdetermine, the power of the moving image in dismantling centuries of oppression. I speak very purposely here of a collective "we"; as Laura Irwin and Ralina L. Joseph (2021) argue in their essay on watching *Woke*, the responsibility of critical reception may indeed fall to audiences. Speaking of the burden of representation in Black television, they argue that "as viewers we are often quick to place that responsibility on the representations we consume. We as the audience must recognise that there is room for non-woke Black TV, even bad Black TV, because one Black television show isn't representative of all Black representations" (Irwin and Joseph 2021). And yet this, too, is complicated as minoritized audiences - including, they argue, Irwin and Joseph themselves - are likely to continue to seek fulfilment or validation from onscreen representation.

Perhaps even as I am critical of the power of representation, my palpable disappointment and anxiety belie the ways in which I, too, continue to place undue emphasis on the promise of progressive fat imagery. A pervasive feeling across fat studies at large is the sense that the "right" representation might at least help to solve cultural problems that have proven too difficult at a national, and even at an individual, level. My study has been time and again turned on its head by my own sense of responsibility to these problems, as I attempt to come to neat conclusions about the fat body and about television. However, television at its core constitutes - though necessarily interwoven with its pedagogical and communal and domestic fixtures - a form of entertainment. As a result, there can be no single answer to the messy manners in which bodies find themselves intertwined with and contained in small screens, let alone with the various outfits and colour schemes and narrative structures and politics that influence these intertwinings. The aim of this study has been to pick apart some of the popular notions - unapologetic-ness, wokeness, positivity, wellness - that unavoidably surround fatness in its contemporary representations and to

better understand what has at times felt like a frustrating emptiness to the examples presented. So here, at the end, I would like to retrace my steps and attempt to provide some way of thinking about television, the trappings of contemporary fat representation and images of fatness, more broadly, as the site of so many illuminating complications and incrustations.

I would like to briefly suggest, against popular logic, that the fat body *is* an apology, not as a verb but as a noun; in its very existence, independent of its own actions or feelings, the fat body *is made* an apology for a thin body. For this, I turn back to the "Oxford English Dictionary" which offers a definition that both gels with my earlier reading of "apology" and departs from it, effectively encapsulating my reticence to present *Shrill* and the pool scene as wholly radical or to entirely denigrate the problematic turn toward wellness in popular fat representation or to answer the question of importance in regards to positive fat representation; here, an apology is "something which, as it were, merely appears to apologise for the absence of what ought to have been there; a poor substitute" rather than an active verb related to individual effort ("apology", n.d.). In more closely considering the body as an apology not just in its positive reframing but for the "absence of what ought to have been there," I am drawn back once more to the example of Halo Top, perhaps the pinnacle of an apology for ice cream. I noted earlier that the Halo Top ads are congruent with the visual style and tone of *Shrill*, from their soft pastels to their upbeat tones, but there is a tie that more closely binds the woke images of fat discussed in this chapter: from *Biggest Loser* to *Shrill* to the Halo Top advert, "positive" depictions of fatness remain crafted entirely around that which is missing. I am reminded here, too, of sociologist Barry Glassner's observation that most people believe "the worth of a meal lies principally in what it lacks. The less sugar, salt, fat, calories, carbs, preservatives, additives, or other suspect stuff, the better the meal" (2007: 3).

There are clearly joys and pleasures to be had from eating the whole tub of Halo Top just as there are in consuming scenes like the pool party or Annie's awakening and just as there are in imagining holistic wellness for disadvantaged fat people. However, in these programmes, there is no heaviness, no thorny politics, no unfinished concern allowed; in other words, there are no weighty subjects that go untempered by unessential lightness. Halo Top's branding is ebulliently defined by what it lacks - No fat! No calories! No "shoulds!"

- while promising to deliver large quantities intended for immediate consumption ("save the bowl - you're gonna want the whole pint" reads one foil lid). *Shrill*'s aesthetic profile draws from its women-centric dramedy peers and relies on the Instagram accounts and memoirs of good fatties to construct a subject of utter, bubble-gum lightness and joy. The reality show wellness reboots, just like their predecessors, churn out episodes so quickly and with such a deeply ingrained visual and temporal language in their production, there is as little substantive meaning to Erica Lugo's physical therapy affirmations as to Karamo Brown's lifestyle tips. These depictions blur together into pastel-infused treats that do not fill or satisfy. Rather, they are full of a weightless pleasure which, owed to their delicate and empty constitutions, leave me hungry.

Conclusion

Introduction

In June 2020 - as the UK eased country-wide lockdown restrictions in a bid to "help businesses get back on their feet and get people back in their jobs" (UK Government 2020) - Boris Johnson and his administration launched a new weight-loss campaign. The "Better Health Strategy" (National Health Service n.d.) was (and is) comprised of four basic tenets: lose weight, get active, quit smoking, and drink less. To promote this new public health initiative, the Prime Minister tweeted (Johnson 2020):

> Losing weight is hard but with some small changes we can all feel fitter and healthier. If we all do our bit, we can reduce our health risks and protect ourselves against coronavirus – as well as taking pressure off the NHS.

In the attached video, which follows a crisp white-shirted PM awkwardly walking a dog in a park, Johnson reasserts this message: "if you can get your weight down a bit, then, and protect your health, you'll also be protecting the NHS."

This campaign is a transparent attempt to shift the blame for the toll of the UK's poor coronavirus policy-making from the economy-focused government - Johnson was famously reported to have said he would rather "let the bodies pile high in their thousands" than lose money due to another lockdown - to the individual citizen. A slew of reports from government research bodies and UK government-funded research (UK Government 2020b; Foo et al. 2021; Holmes 2021; Yates et al. 2021) have similarly fostered a glut of fear-mongering fat panic from popular news outlets (Whiteside 2021). These studies tend to ignore the nuances of correlation and the many factors that intersect with fat that cannot be measured by the BMI, although some are more willing than others to point out the "elusive" connection between "obesity" and the novel coronavirus (Gao et al. 2021). In reference to claims that "Covid-19 death rates are 10 times higher in countries where more than half of the adult population is classified as overweight," one paper detailing a recent study (Wise 2021) quickly brushes off a critical piece of information: "A small number of countries seem

to run against the trend … The report said that this was likely to be due to national responses to the pandemic, including border controls" (372). The lack of border controls, appropriate lockdown measures, and useful government interventions in countries like the US and UK are considered ancillary to their much larger (pun intended) problem: their fat populations. Fat people, it seems, are not only despicably responsible for their own mortality risks but are also to blame for poor healthcare provisions for the good biocitizens (who, of course, contracted Covid not by fault but by chance), "straining" the NHS and filling up American ICUs. Further, of course, is the issue of positioning *being* fat alongside *quitting* smoking, *getting* active, and *drinking* less. While the latter three are active behaviours, fat is a state of being that cannot be instantly altered or necessarily changed at all.

When I started writing this thesis in 2017, I intended to open the introduction with a powerful visual example from the third season of Ryan Murphy's *American Horror Story* (2011 -). In the show, fat, Black witch Queenie (Gabourey Sidibe) uses her body as a living voodoo doll, creating emotional and physical responses in her targets. Queenie, in one episode, fends off a haunting beast, a former slave-turned-minotaur at the hands of a slave owner, the immortal witch Delphine (Kathy Bates). The Beast has come, via dark magic, to exact his revenge, but Queenie leads him instead to a greenhouse in the back garden. Here, she entices the Beast with her powers; she begins to masturbate, the camera cutting back and forth between the thick, wiry fur and horns of the minotaur and Queenie's hand thrust under her skirt. As she touches herself, the Beast becomes aroused and, as the camera finally cuts away from the deep shadows of the greenhouse, he advances on Queenie and has sex with her. The purpose of this example was initially to discuss the myriad ways in which fat bodies - particularly fat, Black bodies - are portrayed as sensational vehicles of anxious sexual acquiescence and thus invoke a fetishised discomfort with unambiguous fatness. However, in light of Johnson's bodies piled high and the renewed focus on "overweight" individuals in the last years, this scene takes on new meanings which speak with more clarity to this thesis as a whole. Although Queenie touches her own body, the end goal is to soothe the beast in front of her; her self-stimulation is a means to an end, a job to be completed - no less - to save a slave owner. Later, when the Beast leaves her covered in wounds and nearly dead on the floor, her bleeding form serves as warning. The fat body is one that can be blamed for unmet expectations and that should be offered up when danger comes to the door;

it is a body to be used, destroyed, and then ignored, left bleeding on the floor in the service of someone with more power.

It is within this culture of dangerous blame that representations of fatness have emerged over the past years in difficult and discordant ways, and these emergences have presented the basis for this thesis in ways that surpass my early analyses of the single traumatic image. Rather, in the continuous, messy, and borderless space of television, explicit engagements with fatness have blossomed, from the seemingly-endless run of reality shows featuring the "morbidly obese" to narrative comedies and dramas like Hulu's *Shrill* (2019 - 2021), Amazon Prime's *Dietland* (2018), and NBC's *This is Us* (2018 - 2022) which all deal openly and blatantly with a politics of fat, building on (and sometimes subverting) earlier representations. For this reason, Queenie finds herself nestled into the conclusion; the example is useful not as an introduction to the cascading effects of anti-fat bias expressed through gendered, racialised trauma, but rather as a final reminder of one in a myriad of the ravages of fat oppression that echo across contemporary TV. In light of the risk of claiming this all as entirely new (see: Buonanno 2019; Scannell 2009: 220), I have avoided claiming that it is a recent shift for fat bodies to shoulder the blame for perceived crises of public health and moral failing in media (Saguy 2013) or for television to engage in thorny, complicated, and divisive debates about (and through) identity forms. Images of fat people - particularly of fat women - have served as moral lessons and as punchlines for many years in popular culture, and have always been intertwined with politics of race, class, and gender in complicated ways (Farrell 2011; Strings 2019).

Rather, my aim in this thesis has been to illuminate some of many pathways toward recognising and embodying fat representations by endeavouring to see through the invisibility (or hyper(in)visibility) of fatness. Throughout this work, I argue that methods and thinking in fat studies and feminist media studies can be applied to television simultaneously and to powerful effect. By basing my study on a framework of biopower (and the ensuing "bios"), I have demonstrated that fat on TV is often mediated through complicated pedagogical frameworks that contribute to an ongoing moral panic around weight and health. This framing persists from the more apparently damaging formats of medicalised and governmentalised reality television (e.g., *Fat: Fight of My Life, My 600-Lb Life*) and "trash" TV (the Honey Boo Boo and Mama June series) to the seemingly positive

slants of women-centric dramedies and melodrama (e.g., *My Mad Fat Diary*, *Drop Dead Diva*, *Shrill*) and the recent revival of wellness reality shows (e.g., *Queer Eye*, *The Biggest Loser*). Although there are some programmes that seem to address these problematic tendencies in TV's composition of fat (e.g., *Dietland*), there are, at present, very few enduring narratives of fatness that resist these dominant ideologies. It is no longer enough, I argue, to celebrate the "mere presence" of fat bodies onscreen (Frater 2009); rather, research on fat representation must work to realise the intricacies of the sociopolitcal constructs of fatness and the important intersections that inform the shifting boundaries of television.

In other words, I have worked to suggest that by "fattening" feminist media studies, new possibilities and constructive sites of meaning are illuminated for both large bodies and small screens. Now, I discuss the findings of my research as a whole and consider how they speak to the existing feminist scholarship on fat identities and on television. I think through the significance and potential for this work, considering the realities of fat experience and the current state of popular discourse on fatness. I then conclude this chapter by considering directions that fattened feminist research could take and reflecting on how I intend to develop this criticism going forward. Rather than exhaustively covering the topic, this project has merely opened the door to a wide range of thoughts and potentials that might be harnessed in connecting fatness to TV and fat studies to feminist media studies. After many years of slenderness taking centre stage, I find myself excited to consider further how fat might move in from the wings and take the spotlight in more meaningful ways.

Findings & Contributions

Through the case studies that make up this thesis, I have demonstrated three levels at which fat produces effects in contemporary TV: the individual anticitizen body (the thin woman within), the body in gendered familial relations (the fat-involved mother-daughter relationship), and the body in active cultural conversation (the woke aesthetics of body positivity). By doing so, I have endeavoured to demonstrate the boundless space opened by the intersection of fat and feminist media studies in an academic context where such interdisciplinary studies have frequently been waved off as less academic pursuits and more

"exercise[s] in group therapy" (Pausé & Taylor 2021).[1] I have endeavoured here to give a clear picture of the productive potential in making fat visible by unpicking the conventions of television that equally endeavour to render it hidden (Allen 1992). And, working from primarily texts produced since 2010, I have considered the meaning of visibility as both that which reveals and that which exposes in the age of social media.

In the first chapter of this thesis, "Resubstantiating the Thin Woman Within," I considered how the trope of the thin woman within reveals the ways in which fat is culturally constructed on - and sometimes through - television. Through analysis of a number of sitcoms - *Frasier*, *Friends*, *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, and *New Girl* - I considered how fat suits evoke the ways in which large bodies are liminalised, feminised, and made into punchlines. Here, I considered how fat is both the literal prosthetic worn by the actor as well as the narrative prosthetic, which Mitchell & Snyder (2000) call the "crutch upon which narratives lean" to espouse analytical insights into characters. I also considered fat more closely through the lens of failed biocitizenship, approaching *Fat: the Fight of my Life* and *My 600-Lb Life* to consider how weighty bodies are governmentalised and medicalised on television in a way that both reflects and recreates existing cultural paradigms and stigmas. I consider how class factors into these depictions as both a representational frame that assists in connecting fat bodies to failures of good citizenship and as a literal component in the shaming medical rhetoric that continues to entice participants with the promise of life-changing surgery and (potential) money. Finally, I turn to *Drop Dead Diva*, to question how the trope functions when it is made literal. I find that the more fantastical elements of the production - from the protagonist's dream musical numbers to her instantly-ready makeup - play with the concept in a subversive manner. However, I conclude that despite this, and despite the subversions of the notion of haunting and spectral fat, the show's narrative closes down its exploration of the concept by ultimately - yet again - reinforcing the trope. This chapter is significant as it brings together a narrative trope of fatness that has yet to be explored in academic study or in pop culture. The trope could be fleshed out further in future

[1] Both fat and feminist media studies are made subject to this kind of denigration in a moment where appreciation and funding for STEM disciplines far eclipses that of the arts and humanities. In the summer of 2021, for example, the UK government designated degrees in arts, humanities, and social sciences (which are those that most often challenge white supremacist ideologies or deal in complicated questions of identity and community) as being of "low value" (Bulatis 2021).

scholarship, attending to the possible range of examples in which it is represented and considering the ways it might change again in the coming years. As I state in that chapter, though, I do not see the trope shifting too significantly any time soon, as fat prosthetics and anti-citizen fat narratives continue unabated in contemporary TV.

In the second chapter, "Television in the Home; Fatness in the Family," I evoke the Eleusinian myth of Demeter and Persephone in order to untangle the narrative pattern of separation and initiation enacted between fat-involved mother-daughter pairs. In articulating serial forms of women-centric television and TV depictions of motherhood and mothering, I lay the foundation for an argument about the ways in which the involvement of fat enhances and intensifies existing narrative patterns. In this pursuit, I first look to reality television matriarch Mama June Shannon and her brood of nicknamed children, particularly Alana, or Honey Boo Boo. Working through the patterns of their relationship and the form of reality TV, I refer to Amy West's (2011) concept of "dirt" to closely consider the ways in which the pair circle round one another in ways that are intensified by their fatness. Then, I turn to the example of NBC show *This is Us* to consider how fat-involvement affects narrative motion in a pairing where only the daughter is fat. I conclude here that the rhythm and narrative movements between the thin mother and her fat daughter illuminate how fat disrupts traditional femininities by interrupting the flow of the maternal, domestic relationship. This chapter is significant as it gestures at the ways in which fat can be used as a metaphor for television without compromising the specificities of fat representation on TV, particularly where these representations intersect in meaningful ways with issues of class and race.

Finally, in the third chapter, "(Un)apologetic Fatties on Woke TV," I closely consider Hulu's *Shrill* in relation to ideas of "wokeness" and the positive representation of fat. Here, I analyse the highly popular fat pool party scene from the first season of the show and then broaden my thinking to describe the beginnings of a woke (popular social justice oriented) aesthetic in TV. I use this example further to think about lightness and pleasantry, before diving into my next line of inquiry on the push toward an "unapologetic" and highly visible portrayal of fatness. As the body positivity movement has become more popular, I argue, fat bodies have become more likely to appear onscreen in more positive lights. This is, I argue, a double-edged sword: while increased fat representation on TV can be affirming and

exciting for marginalised groups, they can also be damaging in new and difficult ways. To explain this effect, I turn to the recent reboots of wellness TV shows like *Queer Eye* and *The Biggest Loser*. These shows have changed significantly in their explicit attitudes toward fat bodies, moving away from shaming and stigma and toward positive reinforcement and the promotion of self-care among participants. However, I argue, this positivity is even more pernicious than the openly stigmatising rhetoric of past reality TV; because positivity is used in these text to gloss over the difficulties and nuances of fat lived realities, it has become only more difficult to identify the damaging viewpoints that remain in these programmes. I finish the third chapter with a reflection on the capabilities of television to cater to the needs that representation claims to cure, concluding that the joys and pleasures of a cheery show like *Shrill* coexist with the heavy weight and burden of fat representation.

Using these examples, I have worked to build a foundation for future criticism to see and "name" fat (Harjunen 2017) rather than taking it for granted as a mere collection of bodily material representative of immorality and failure. I have interrogated a variety of televisual forms and allowed for a wide range of examples to be drawn from a brief time period (approx. 10 years) in order to provide a detailed snapshot of the current cultural moment in relation to fat. I hope that through this work I have not only produced writing that speaks in concert with directions in feminist media studies, but that I have also fairly and accurately represented the tenacious efforts of the many fat activists and scholars whose work informs my own. My aim from the beginning of this thesis has been to reframe fat from a shared disease that produces a monolithic experience to an important intersectional lens that we can - and, I argue, must - apply to contemporary texts. If feminist media studies are to understand the infrastructures and institutions that shape modern life and, more specifically, modern television, then it is imperative that fatness be made a part of that conversation. We can no longer ignore or take for granted the claims about obesity as a global epidemic in the wake of an actual global pandemic; fat bodies can no longer be ignored (or left bleeding on the floor, as in *American Horror Story*) in the service of moral superiority.

Throughout this thesis I have argued that fat is not a state of being defined by a set of fixed meanings and codes. Fat is, instead, an ever-changing cultural category that is shaped, formed, and reinforced by institutional narratives about (and political engagements

with) actual, physical bodies. On TV specifically, fatness has changed naturally and simply with the popular tide. Shows from the 90s and early 00s, during the peak of cultural acceptance of the "obesity epidemic," shared a particular tendency toward more explicit anti-fat bias, with plotlines featuring extended jokes about thin main characters either being, becoming, or having once been fat. At the present moment, fat on TV ranges from outright furore to bright positivity. In the future, these depictions will, of course, shift and change again and again, morphing with the hegemonic tendencies of televised content, forms of viewing, and cultural discourse. By better understanding fat and by fattening feminist media scholarship, we can move and shift along with these changes, opening up transgressive avenues of inquiry for many years to come.

Future Avenues of Inquiry

There remain a number of Western programmes that did not make it into this work and many intersections of race, class, and gender that have gone under- or unexplored. In American sitcoms, for example, fat women of colour are often cast as counterpoints to thin White protagonists, though their weight is not usually made explicit in the show; Shirley Bennett (Yvette Nicole Brown) in *Community* (NBC 2009 - 2015), Donna Meagle (Rhetta) in *Parks and Recreation* (NBC 2009 - 2015), and Reagan Wells (Jana Schmieding) in *Rutherford Falls* (Peacock 2021 -) spring to mind. Further study could be conducted to illuminate how fat roles in American sitcoms, to continue with this example, are most typically embodied by women of colour. Sabrina Strings' (2019) influential study of the racial roots of anti-fat bias could provide an excellent resource for unpicking the manner by which white supremacy does and does not guide the representation of Black and Indigenous women in workplace comedies. This produces a series of compelling questions, particularly as the showrunner of *Rutherford Falls* - Sierra Teller Ornelas - is Native American and the show's writer's room is one of the first to be populated primarily by Indigenous and Black writers (Turchiano 2021).

There is also rich ground for study of fatness in relation to the complications of fat as an expression of social realism. There are fat people in British and American soaps such as *Holby City* (BBC One 1999 -), *Days of Our Lives* (NBC 1965 -), or *Coronation Street* (ITV 1960 -) who are often older, maternal/paternal figures and whose existence seems

primarily to be to ground these shows in the routine and everyday. As many "realistic" depictions of fatness coincide closely with the "claims of authenticity and ethical superiority commonly ascribed by the conventional codes of social realism," further attention could certainly be paid to this intersection with particular reference to Glen Creeber's (2005, 2009) influential work on serials and authenticity as well as to Richard Dyer's (1979) foundational thinking about the personal/political through actors and stars.[2] This research could also speak to the claims about "authenticity" and the use of fat suits in contemporary TV, as I discussed in the first chapter.

Another productive area of inquiry that arose during my research is the desire for a fattened TV history. There is, at present, no timeline or history of fat actors on television. There are some very thorough fat histories - Amy Farrell's American history of fatness in "Fat Shame" (2011) and Sabrina Strings' (2019) race-informed history are two recent examples - and there are histories of fat activism, such as Charlotte Cooper's book "Fat Activism" (2016) and the associated ongoing collaborative project, "Timeline of Fat Activist History" (Cooper 2010). There are also informal resources cataloguing fat actors, notably the Instagram account @FatinFilm (run by Black, queer woman Grace Barber-Plentie) which hosts a robust shared spreadsheet documenting appearances of fat characters in TV and film recommended by followers of the account (Blister Features 2020). A future project cataloguing and defining fatness across a broader spread of examples could provide a helpful lexicon for scholars less acquainted with fat studies at large, could trace interesting parallels and intersections with other histories, and could also help to address a wider sense of fat invisibility on a historical level. Fat people are not a recent creation; their absences from and appearances in popular culture throughout time present generative ground for study.

Additionally, there is space for much more critical conversation about the material engagements of fat representation as they collide with lived reality by looking more closely at the emerging genre of the fat memoir and its specific effects on TV. Discussion of television and its interactions with social media has become essentially unavoidable. As

[2] Such a study might follow the path of a scholar like Knox (2018), whose analysis of UK and US adaptations of Shameless cracks open the political shifts between depictions of poverty and the lower class in different iterations of the same narrative.

media convergence has taken place, TV has become less visible as a singular form of entertainment and art. Convergence itself has formed the better part of this conversation, understandably, but there are opportunities opening up for critical analysis of TV and image-based social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok. The muddling of forms and conversations across platforms opens up space for questions of the material and the real as they interact with performance and narrative. A future study could look into questions of mortality and vitality, connecting the pedagogical instructions on "how to live" (bios) embedded in memoirs and social media posts with the concentration in TV on thin/life as opposed to fat/death. Many reality programmes about fat bodies foreground the word "life" in their titles and concentrate closely on the processes of living (washing, eating, sleeping) that are altered from the norm because of weight; many memoirs and posts from influencers and activists similarly highlight these life processes, aiming to normalise "taking up space in a world" designed to "shrink" fat bodies (Hagen 2019).

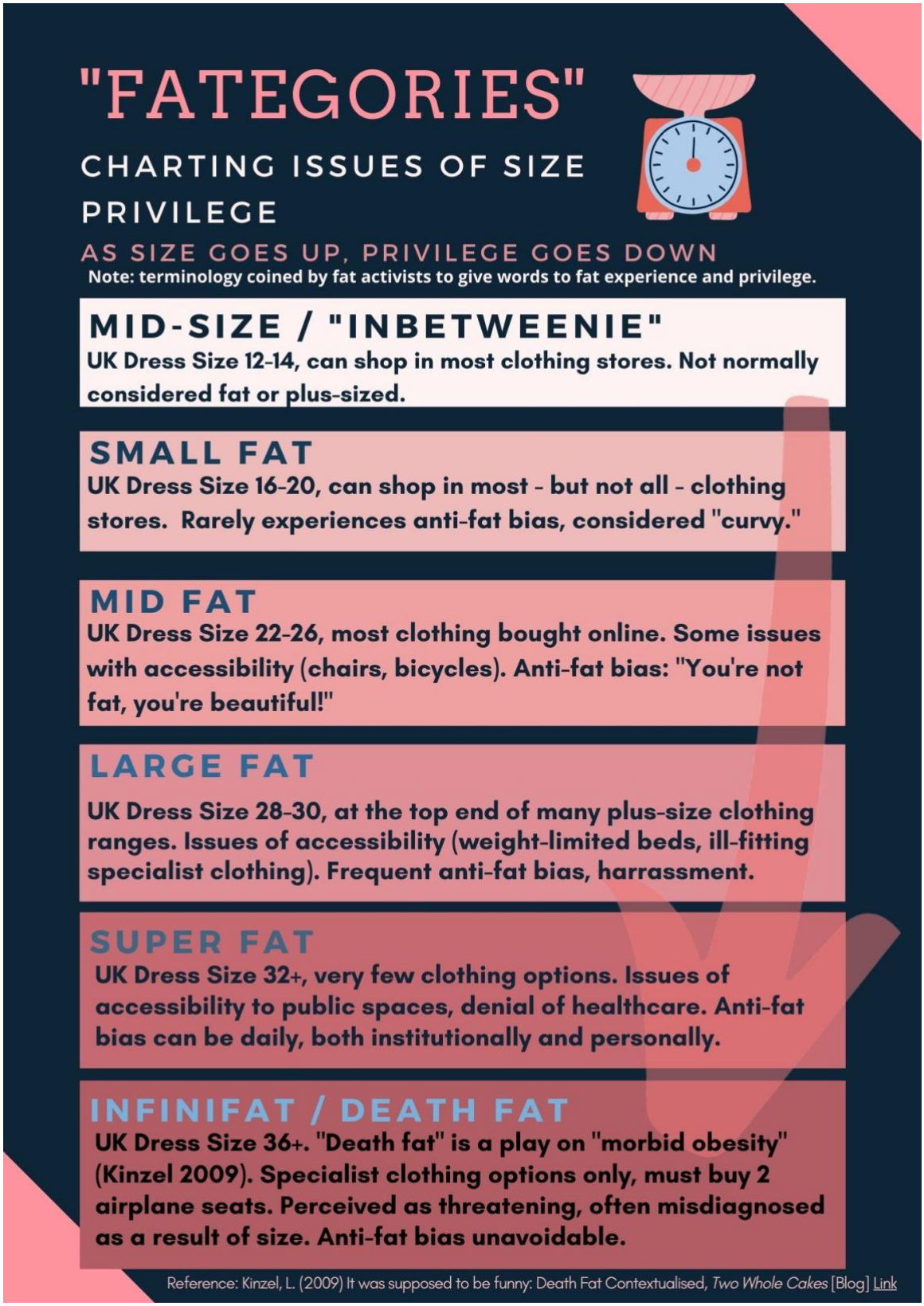
Still, I think the most productive site for my own future research is in fatness and TV as ideologically married concepts. Throughout the process of conducting this research, I have become fascinated by the way in which fatness on the small screen seems to crystallise debates about style and substance. For example, I wonder to what extent fattened analysis presents an opportunity to speak to television tradition and the ways in which TV hegemonises and interacts with ever-present issues of cultural consumption. I have only begun to unpack these more intricate discussions about fatness and television as a form. The idea of "weightlessness" that I mention in my third chapter, for example, speaks closely to thoughts about substance and style in television, as does my thinking on eating with TV (informed by Holdsworth 2021) and particularly on mothering and domesticity; however, deeper questions about quality, style, and substance remain mostly unexplored in this project.

As academic study of TV continues to question the "end" of television (Katz 1996, Katz & Scannell 2009) - perhaps even "eulogising" it, although ironically (Buonnano 2015) - I wonder how the project of re-enlivening fat might speak in concert with the continual reinvigoration efforts toward television. Both fat bodies and TV are liminal entities; while "television-as-we-knew-it continues to disappear" (Dayan 2010: 5) the fat body continues to pass as "on-the-way" to thinness. Both are ceaselessly hovering at the

brink of some unseen but formidable destruction, the sum of their parts in conflict over quality: of life, health, vitality, perfection. Buonanno's (2019) conception of "disregarded disruption" and the Netflix bingeing paradigm - in which viewers are drawn into the act of compressed consumption that suggests a drawn-out parade of "next" programmes - could prove useful to this line of inquiry. She suggests that media scholars must "expand our vision to recognise how the practice of bingeing is not merely the child of technological innovation but is informed by cultural principles of our time" (194) in order to better conceptualise "the unique experience of the parallel (although not synchronised) passing of time in the fictional narrative and in the reality of our lives" (196). Fatness has never really been separate from discussions about TV; it is deeply embedded in the cultural psyche, its poetics and aesthetics are unavoidably real, tied into each of our lives and histories. In shining a light on the metaphors shared between fatness and television and continuing to seek out their intricately woven textual and temporal elements, the possibilities for continued thought are boundless.

Appendix A

Infographic describing the changes in privilege between people of varying sizes, from Mid-Size to “Death Fat.” Inspired by Zoller (2021) and van Amsterdam (2013). For context, this author - at a size 22/24 - considers themselves “mid fat.”



Appendix B

List of key episodes mentioned in the thesis (and reference to images taken within).

TV SHOW	**EPISODE TITLE**	**EPISODE**
Brooklyn Nine-Nine	"USPIS"	Season 2, Episode 8
Dietland	"Y Not?"	Season 1, Episode 3
	"Bedwomb"	Season 1, Episode 10
Drop Dead Diva	"Pilot"	Season 1, Episode 1
	"Do Over"	Season 1, Episode 3
	"The Dress"	Season 1, Episode 9
	"Would I Lie to You"	Season 2, Episode 1
	"The Real Jane"	Season 5, Episode 2
	"It Had to Be You"	Season 6, Episode 13
Friends	"The One Where the Stripper Cries"	Season 10, Episode 1
Jane the Virgin	"Chapter Eighty-Nine"	Season 5, Episode 8
My 600-Lb Life	"Joyce's Story" **(Fig. 1-4, Fig. 1-5)**	Season 8, Episode 7
	"Michael's Story"	Season 9, Episode 9
My Mad Fat Diary	"It's a Wonderful Rae: Part Two" **(Fig 1-1, 1-2)**	Season 1, Episode 6

Queer Eye	"Big Little Lies"	Season 2, Episode 6
Secret Body	"Ashley Anderson"	Season 1, Episode 1 (test pilot)
Shrill	"Annie"	Season 1, Episode 1
	"Pencil"	Season 1, Episode 3
	"Pool" **(Cover Image; Fig. 3-2, 3-3, 3-4)**	Season 1, Episode 4
Steve	"Steve Harvey Asking Organ Donors to See If They Are a Kidney Match for Beloved Cameraman; Hey Steve!; Straight Talk; Harvey's Hundreds" (in text as "Hey Steve!")	Season 2, Episode 153
The Biggest Loser	"902" **(Fig. 3-7)**	Season 9, Episode 2
	"Week 3: Supporting the Team"	Season 18, Episode 3
	"Final Four"	Season 18, Episode 9
The Doctors	"Diet-Food Industry Insider Spills Secrets/11-Year-Old Weighs 300 Pounds"	Season 9; Episode 32

	"Too Real for Reality: The Doctors Get Real with Reality Stars"	Season 10; Episode 127
The Tyra Banks Show	"Model Madness"	Season 1, Episode 163
	"Body-Ville: Women and Body Image"	Season 3, Episode 40
The Masked Singer	"Giving Thanks" **(Fig. 2-3)**	Season 6, Episode 7
This is Us	"The Big Three"	Season 1, Episode 2
	"A Manny-Splendored Thing"	Season 2, Episode 2
	"Number Two" **(Fig. 2-4, 2.5)**	Season 2, Episode 9
	"The Fifth Wheel"	Season 2, Episode 11
	"Pilgrim Rick"	Season 1, Episode 8
	"Changes"	Season 5, Episode 3

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Teleography

1000-Lb Sisters	TLC 2020 - Present
All in the Family	CBS 1971 - 1979
Ally McBeal	Fox 1997 - 2002
American Crime Story	FX 2016 - Present
American Idol	[US] ABC/Fox 2002 - 2016
Broad City	Comedy Central 2014 - 2019
Brooklyn Nine-Nine	Fox/NBC 2013 - 2021
Buffy the Vampire Slayer	The WB 1997 - 2003
Chilling Adventures of Sabrina	Netflix 2018 - 2020
Community	NBC 2009 - 2014 Yahoo! 2015
Coronation Street	ITV 1960 - Present
Crazy Ex-Girlfriend	The CW 2015 - 2019
Days of Our Lives	NBC 1965 – Present
Desperate Housewives	ABC 2004 - 2012
Dietland	AMC 2018
Drop Dead Diva	Lifetime 2009 - 2014
Fat: the Fight of my Life	BBC One 2013

Fleabag	BBC Three 2016 - 2019
Frasier	NBC 1993 - 2004
Friends	NBC 1994 - 2004
Gilmore Girls	The WB 2000 - 2007; The CW 2017
Girls	HBO 2012 - 2017
Good Trouble	Freeform 2019 - Present
Here Comes Honey Boo Boo	TLC 2012 - 2014
Holby City	BBC One 1999 - Present
How I Met Your Mother	Fox 2005 - 2014
Huge	ABC Family 2010
Insecure	HBO 2016 - 2021
Jane the Virgin	The CW 2014 - 2019
Keeping Up with the Kardashians	E! 2007 - 2021
Loosely Exactly Nicole	3 Arts 2016 - 2018
Mad Men	AMC 2007 - 2015
Mama June: From Not to Hot ; Family Crisis; Road to Redemption	WE TV 2017 - 2019; 2020; 2021 - Present
Mike & Molly	CBS 2010-2016
Mom	CBS 2013 - 2021
My 600-Lb Life	TLC 2012 - Present

My Big Fat Fabulous Life	TLC 2015 - Present
My Mad Fat Diary	E4 2013 - 2015
New Girl	Fox 2011 - 2018
Parks and Recreation	NBC 2009 - 2015
Queer Eye	Bravo 2003 - 2007; Netflix 2018 - Present
Roseanne	ABC 1988 - 1997
Rutherford Falls	Peacock 2021 - Present
Secret Body	BBC Scotland 2022 - Present (Test Pilot 2019)
Shrill	Hulu 2019 - 2021
Shut-ins: Britain's Fattest People	CH4 2021 - Present
Six Feet Under	HBO 2001 - 2005
Steve	Facebook Watch 2017 - 2019
Succession	HBO 2018 - Present
That 70's Show	Fox 1998 - 2006
The Biggest Loser	[**US**] NBC 2004-2016; USA 2020-Present [**UK**] SKY 2005–2006; ITV 2009-2013
The Doctors	CBS 2008 - Present

The Jerry Springer Show	Syndication 1991 - 2018
The Masked Singer	Fox 2019 - Present
The Real World	MTV 1992-2017; Facebook Watch 2019; Paramount+ 2021 - Present
The Sopranos	HBO 1999 - 2007
The Thing About Pam	NBC 2022 - Present
The Tyra Banks Show	Syndication 2005 - 2009; The CW 2009-2010
This is Us	NBC 2016 - 2022
Titanic: Into the Heart of the Wreck	CH4 2021
Toddlers & Tiaras	TLC 2009 - 2016
Will & Grace	NBC 1998 - 2006, 2017-2020
Woke	Hulu 2020 - Present

Filmography

Aquaporko!	Kelli Jean Drinkwater, 2013
Darkest Hour	Joe Wright, 2017
Elvis	Baz Luhrmann, 2022
Shallow Hal	Farrelly Brothers, 2001
The Batman	Matt Reeves, 2022
Vice	Adam McKay, 2018